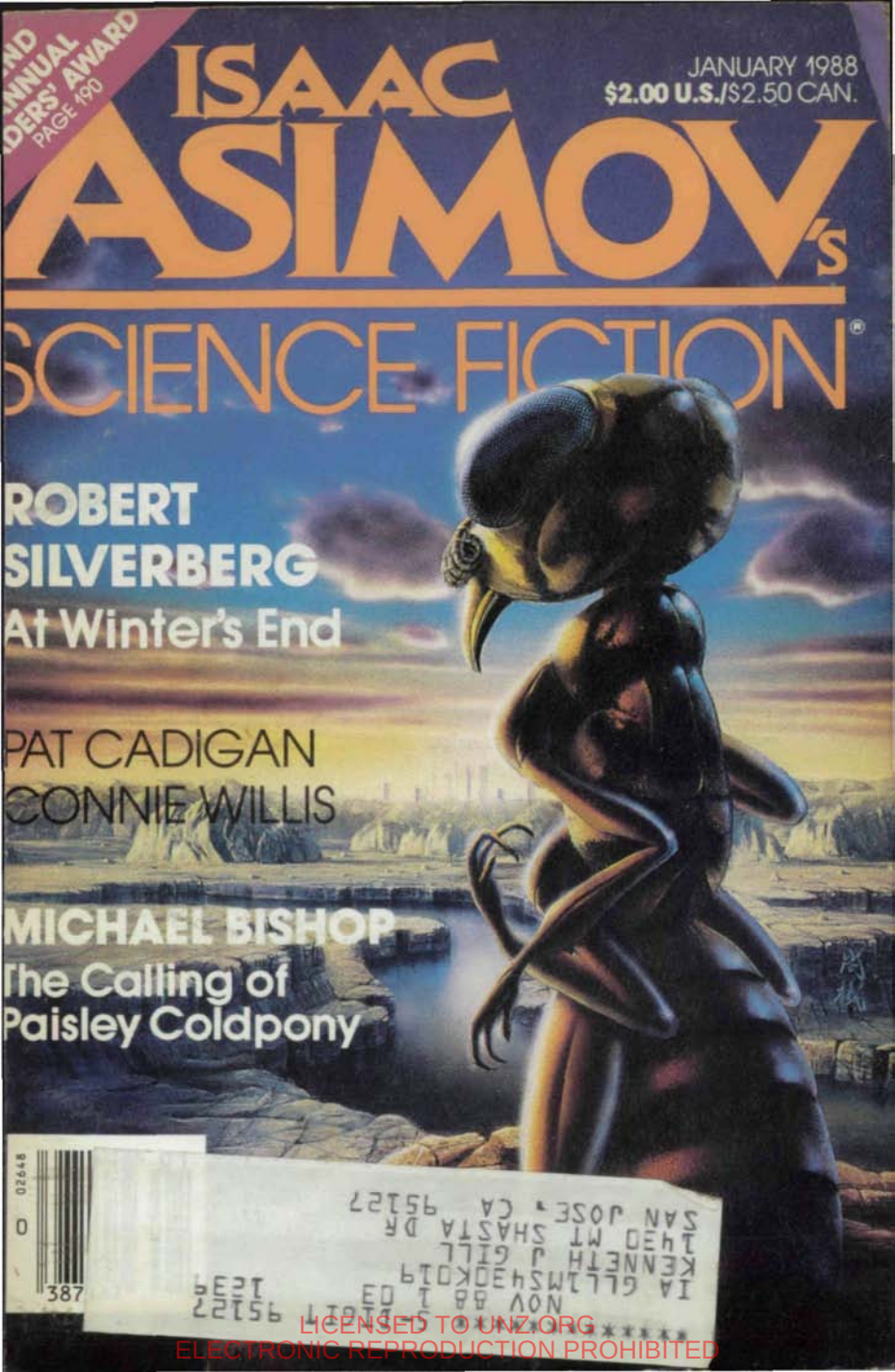

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

SUICIDE

I haven't wanted to write this editorial and did my best to squirm out of it. However, an editorialist has his duties. I am honor-bound to discuss the issues that are of importance to science fiction readers and writers; all the more so if they are controversial and painful; and most so if they impinge directly upon us.

So here goes.

Alice Sheldon wrote science fiction under the pseudonym of "James Tiptree, Jr.," and we have published her. She had a novelette ("Yanqui Doodle") published in our July 1987 issue, in fact.

In the early morning of May 19, 1987, Mrs. Sheldon called her lawyer and informed him of what she was about to do. Life for her husband, who was eightyish, blind, and helpless, had become a meaningless burden to him. She shot him to death.

And then, either because her own health problems made life meaningless to her as well, or because she did not wish to face an inevitable trial for murder, or both, she shot and killed herself as well.

Mrs. Sheldon's death was a tragedy, but the circumstances that forced her to it were an even greater tragedy. Mrs. Sheldon was condemned to death by society because her husband was condemned to life.

Are there no conditions when life is meaningless and should be quietly ended? If a person is subject to pain that won't stop as a result of a disease that can't be cured, must he or she suffer that pain as long as possible when there are gentle ways of putting an end to life? If a person suffers from a disease that deprives him or her of all memory and makes of him or her a helpless lump of flesh that may live on for years (in the sense of having the heart and lungs work away automatically and uselessly), must he or she be forced to live on to the slowly prolonged agony and impoverishment of a family? If a person is in a coma from which no recovery can reasonably be expected, must he or she still remain so until a possibly strong heart stops beating? In fact, in all these cases, where death might come reasonably soon if physicians withheld their hands, must we use all the resources of modern medical sci-

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ence to keep the pain going, to keep the vegetable alive?

The answers to all these questions, according to law, seem to be that life must be continued and must even be prolonged as long as possible. To fail to do so is murder. If a person is sufficiently alive to want to end the torture himself and does so, anyone who helps him do so has also committed murder.

All this seems a singular refinement of cruelty. No horse, no dog, no living non-human creature who was irretrievably wounded, would be allowed to suffer by any decent person. The animals would be killed "as an act of mercy." But there is no mercy for a human being. A criminal who is executed for some horrible deed and is not instantly killed would not be allowed to suffer; he is shot to death at close range as a "coup de grace" (a stroke of mercy). But for someone who has committed the greater crime of being ill, there is no mercy.

Percy Williams Bridgman was an American physicist who pioneered high-pressure techniques and who won a Nobel prize in 1946 as a result. He was eighty years old in 1961. He was incurably and painfully ill of Paget's disease, a progressive and disabling disease of the bones, and (being a scientist), he judged, quite coolly, that August 20 would be the last day on which he would remain strong enough to take the necessary action. On that day, he shot himself to death, after writing a note condemning society for forcing him to

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do this alone, and without help or sympathy.

Why, then, is society so fiendishly cruel?

One argument that has the merit of at least sounding sensible is that euthanasia (Greek for "good death") can easily be abused. You start by killing the incurably ill and you go on to kill old people who are merely a nuisance, or who have property that an heir is tired of waiting for. Or else you declare whole classes of people as "unfit" or "inferior" and do them the favor of killing them—Nazi-style.

But is that the way the world works? We give guns to policemen and tell them to defend themselves against armed criminals. Might they not proceed to kill anyone who inconveniences them and declare him to have been a criminal? Indeed, that has been known to happen, but a decent society makes every effort to investigate such cases, and to punish policemen who use undue force. We are every one of us allowed to kill in self-defense, but if any of us did so, the circumstances would be carefully examined to make sure that the right was not abused.

In other words, of *course* there is the possibility of abuse, but there are also ways of preventing abuse, or punishing it if prevention fails. Society adopts such abuse-prevention methods in innumerable other cases, and would adopt them in an attempt to make sure that euthanasia-abuse be held to a minimum.

Another possible argument is that life is sacred; that it was given by God and could only be taken by God.

That argument, if accepted, might make it seem that people did not have the right to kill themselves, or to have others kill them, where life was physically meaningless. But how can it be used when medical science is used to artificially prolong a meaningless life?

A man killed his wife, who was hopelessly ill and in pain, and he was tried for murder. His son, weeping at his father's predicament, said "God tried to take my mother's life away, but the doctors wouldn't let Him."

We can go farther. Does anyone really think that life is sacred or is it just a mumbo-jumbo argument? I have already said that not only policemen, but all of us are allowed to kill in self-defense. Soldiers are sent out to kill even when their own lives are not directly threatened. If an airplane bombs an undefended city, the nation that owns the airplane does not consider the bombardier to be guilty of murder. He might be killing wholesale even when he is not himself threatened and cannot therefore be viewed as committing the deed in self-defense—but he is viewed as defending his nation. If he somehow crashes and is captured by the enemy, the nation he was defending would be horrified if the enemy he was attacking chose to view him as a murderer and executed him.

Nor is it just a matter of war. Criminals are executed. For a while

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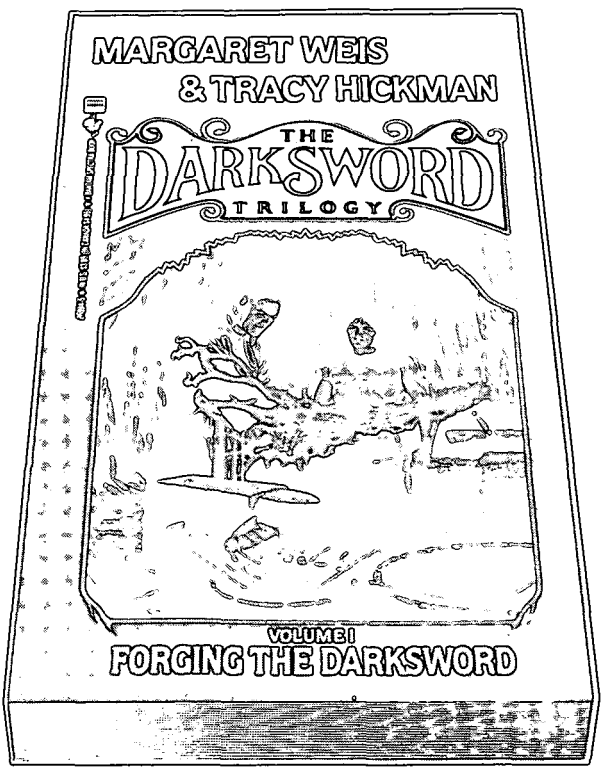

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the death penalty was outlawed in the United States, but there was a strong push for reinstatement and in many states it is now legal to kill a human being if he committed certain crimes (such as not being able to afford a clever lawyer). I suspect that most Americans would approve of capital punishment for certain crimes. I must admit that I might approve, too, for certain crimes—but that just means that if we think that life is sacred, we permit certain exceptions.

In that case, we might permit the exceptions that would allow for reasonable euthanasia.

We might argue that human beings are imperfect and sinful and that if we were all decent godly people, we wouldn't have these problems with the sacredness of life.

And yet in the Bible when the Israelites are fighting the Moabites, these are the instructions given the Israelites, "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (Numbers 31:17-18).

Here are instructions in general for laying siege against a city: "... if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee ... all people that is found therein ... shall serve thee" (Deuteronomy 20:11). If, however, the people in the city don't wish to be slaves, and resist, then "when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of thy sword" (Deuteronomy 20:13).

In later years, the prophet Samuel gives instructions to King Saul to make war on the Amalekites: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (1 Samuel 15:3). Saul defeats them but spares the King of Amalek, and the best of the animals. This infuriates Samuel, who says to Saul, "thou hast rejected the work of the Lord, and the Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel" (1 Samuel, 15:26). Samuel then goes on to kill the Amalekite king with his own hand.

If the Lord permits all this smiting; if, indeed, He insists upon it; then I get the impression, somehow, that life may not be all that sacred to religious people. Certainly, wars fought over differences in religion (sometimes very minor ones), from Biblical times right down to the present, have been remarkable for their ferocity.

Well, not being religious, I'm certainly against war and violence, but I do favor a gentle and careful "good death" in extreme cases of age and illness and pain. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I would like to express my extreme enjoyment of Charles Sheffield's story, "Trapalanda," in the June issue, and also his earlier story "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine." I especially like Mr. Sheffield's work because it exposes the reader not only to the wonders and mysteries in the world of SF, but also to the exotic and exciting prospects offered by our own world, such as the South American highlands in "Trapalanda" or a remote African village in "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine"—something often overlooked when one gets wrapped up in the cosmic overview of SF.

Also, I would like to comment on your mention of the Vietnamese War Memorial in Washington D.C. I am only sixteen years old, so I can't really have "forgotten" the Vietnam War, as I never really knew about it in the first place, at least not from personal experience. I can tell you from personal experience, however, that the group of people my age I've talked to on the subject and myself don't see the monument simply as a memorial to brave men that died in battle and are, therefore, deserving of honor. Instead, we see it more as a memorial to the folly that caused their death. One may feel proud and patriotic visiting a World War II monument, but you feel more humble visiting a Vietnamese War monument; just as a memorial erected to the people who died at Auschwitz would say "This must never happen again," so does the Vietnamese War Memorial serve to emphasize in the minds of today's youth the evil and ungloriousness of war; especially unnecessary war, and the needlessness of the deaths of the men for whom the memorial was erected.

Sincerely,

Katherine Crosswhite
Superior, AZ

Golly, I hope you're right.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A and Staff,

Just renewed my subscription last month and was rewarded with the June '87 issue of *Asimov*'s. I've been with the magazine for ten years and never regretted the price of the subscription. My only gripe is the length of the subscription is now only twenty-four months, just short of two years. Is it possible to lengthen that and make it three or four years? Two just fly by so fast and it is time to renew or lose.

As I said, I read the June issue and it is a jewel. The whole issue

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was read too fast and I enjoyed each moment. Thanks for the good times over the last ten years, and for the next ten.
Sincerely,

F. Hartsfield
Wimer, OR

P.S. Kudos to the person who changed the glue on the address labels—they pull off without damage to the cover. Thanks.

I suspect the subscription people would be uneasy about extending the period too greatly because of the fact that in the interval the price of the magazine might be forced upward. O tempora, O mores.

—Isaac Asimov

O Estimable and Much Revered Doctor;

I demand a full apology for your most unseemly conduct in the June issue of *IAsfm* (my first). The SF in it was so exasperatingly well written that I was trapped into reading it all day, neglecting to do my homework. The next day, I failed my trigonometry quiz, lowering my average from an A+ to a B− in one swell foop. IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!

Henceforth, I shall expect to see dull, yawn-provoking fare entombed within the pages of your magazine. In fact, if you will just replace my subscription with a dozen Harlequin romances, I will be content. You really should be ashamed of yourself.
Somewhat sincerely,

Jeanhee Chung
Orange, CT

P.S. Actually, I got a Big Bang out of the Letters section; I hadn't known that SF was so universally popular.

We apologize. Perhaps if you try reading the stories backwards, you will find them sufficiently dull to enable you to maintain your splendid scholastic record.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

You now have the honor of being the recipient of the first fan letter I have ever written. I discovered science fiction shortly after learning to read, and from the first, you were one of my favorite science fiction authors. When I discovered your non-fiction and found to my delight that I liked it even better than your fiction, I elevated you to my favorite author. Period. Thanks for many years of enjoyment and mental stimulation.

I have also enjoyed the magazine that bears your name from the very first issue. I can't honestly say I have liked every single story I have found in it, but I am sure there are stories I liked which others didn't. I realize the impossibility of pleasing everyone all the time and that mediocrity is the inevitable result of attempting to do so.

Two items I always find interesting in your magazine are the editorial column and the letters column. In your June '87 issue, there was a letter by Dan Shine who expressed difficulty imagining that anything has been here "all along." It mystifies me that anyone should have any greater difficulty imagining that matter-energy has always existed than that God has

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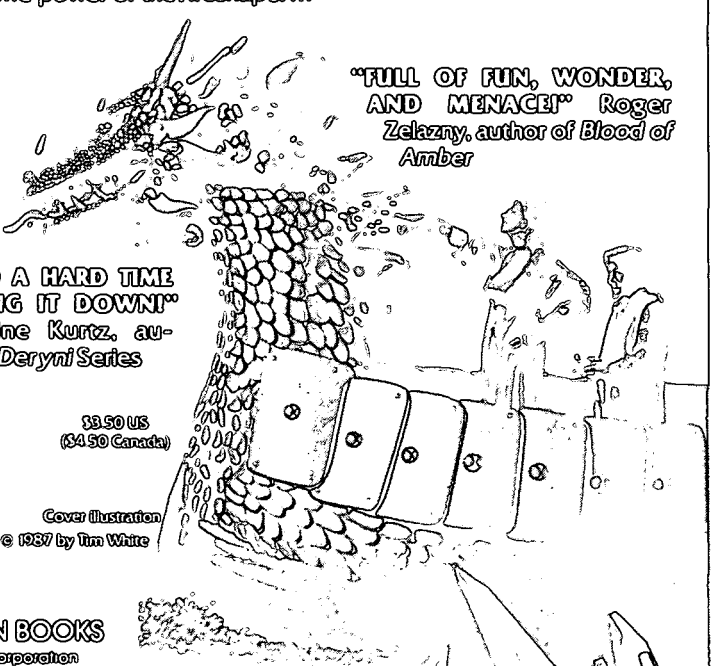

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always existed. To me it is nearly impossible to imagine that anything could be created from nothing or destroyed without a trace with or without divine intervention.

I also have great difficulty with the concept of the *supernatural.* As far as I'm concerned, nature necessarily includes everything that exists or can exist. I don't deny the existence of God, only that he can exist without being an important part (perhaps the *most* important part) of nature. To me, to insist that God is supernatural or apart from nature is equivalent to saying he doesn't exist except in man's imagination (which is itself a natural phenomenon). If God exists and can perform feats that seem to us *supernatural,* it is only because we have not yet discovered the natural principles which make them possible. Modern television sets or micro-computers would surely seem to be magical, supernatural objects to even the most rational people of earlier eras.

Thanks again for many years of enjoyable and enriching reading. May you live to produce another three hundred books, and may I live long enough to read them all, and may the forces of bigotry and censorship be ultimately defeated.
Sincerely,

Gunnar Reiersen
Austin, TX

I think that there is the concept of "natural law" that always applies and admits of no exceptions in the natural world. If nevertheless something unusual comes along that seems not to be bound by this "natural law," it is "supernatural" ("above the natural"). It is easy to imagine entities not bound by natural law—fairies, demons, witches, wizards, sprites, angels, and, of course, gods. The difficult thing is to conceive of natural law, which, even today, is accepted by very few. Most people are firm believers in one form or another of magic and supernaturalism. I am, of course, one of the minority.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois:

Just recently I was reading Frederik Pohl's excellent book *Yesterday's Tomorrows.* His comments on the reader's relationship with an editor, notably the responsibility a reader has to express pleasure and displeasure with a magazine, prompted me to write to you.

I always feel the two dollars I have to spend on your magazine is never even a fraction of what the magazine is worth. It truly is the best deal in town.

Yet, there was one particular month in which your magazine was nothing short of outstanding. Your Mid-December 1986 issue could be the standard by which modern science fiction magazines are measured.

And I am not heaping praise lightly. Besides the fine story by Dr. Asimov, you also had in your magazine one of the best short stories I have ever read, "Laugh Track," by Harlan Ellison. I have been a fan of his ever since I came across *Deathbird Stories* in the library years ago.

Since I live in a town where art is considered making candles, or quilts, I feel that it is a lucky ac-

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cident that even two of Ellison's forty books appeared in our public library. So I find myself searching through anthologies and hunting through piles and heaps of old magazines to find a story by Ellison. His work represents all that is right in the world and most of what is wrong, and as a struggling science fiction author I would gladly sacrifice my right arm for the talent in Mr. Ellison's right pinky. He could possibly be the best writer in the world today.

So I thank you for printing his story and hope you can get some more of his work soon. Keep up the excellent job you do so well.

Sincerely,

Ross McPhail
Quincy, IL

For goodness sake, don't sacrifice your right arm. Think of something else. If you have Harlan's pinky-talent, you'll need your right arm for typing.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner:

Your magazine continues great. Please stop finding talented newcomers. I have a tough enough time as it is getting anybody to pay attention to me. Maybe we could have a quota system, with only established pros allowed to sell new stories between now and 1995.

Your pal,

George Alec Effinger
New Orleans, LA

Oddly enough, George, that's exactly the thought that occurred to me when you appeared on the scene.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. (Dr.?) Asimov:

I have been reading your publication off and on for several years and I always enjoy reading your Editorial first. You are a bit overblown at times, but, on the whole, your column is enjoyable.

Imagine my surprise when I found a serious mistake of fact in your editorial in the June issue! In my wildest dreams I never thought I would be able to catch a mistake of fact of yours.

The mistake is this: The names on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., are listed in chronological order by the date of death, *not* in alphabetical order as you have stated.

I have read *Foundation's Edge* and *Foundation and Earth* and enjoyed them very much. I didn't even give a second thought to the notion that the people had forgotten the location of Earth. In fact, I thought it was quite logical that people of an advanced race would choose to suppress the knowledge of a world where people lived in a constant state of armed preparedness ruled by megalomaniacs who control nuclear warheads in sufficient number to destroy every living cell on the face of the planet.

Keep up the good work.

Yours very truly,

Andrew D. Harding
1126 North President St.
Wheaton, IL 60187

Yes, others have pointed out my mistake, too. It proves that I never looked at the Vietnam Memorial. Now that I think of it, however, I stand amazed at it as a public relations ploy of terrific success. By putting the names in non-alpha-

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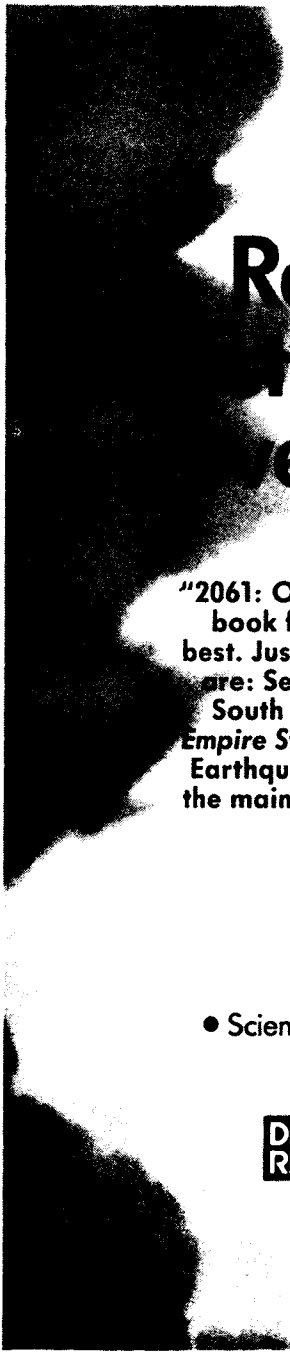

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Arthur C. Clarke

2061: odyssey three

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betical order, it makes it impossible to find a name quickly. This means, in turn, that a) people have to study the monument in a slow and prolonged manner, forgetting its significance in their painstaking search, and b) finding the name becomes a triumph which neutralizes any realization that the deaths were caused by political shortsightedness.

—Isaac Asimov

Subject: Your response to letter of Dan Shine, Cincinnati, Ohio, Page 16, *IAsfm*, June, 1987
Dear Dr. Asimov:

In your comment that the Big Bang theory postulates the origin of matter out of nothing according to accepted quantum principles, how do you define the word "nothing"?

If it's a tricky usage meaning "not any particular entity," I'll begrudge you an A+ in Editorial Issue Dodging.

Quantification uses numbers. How can the author of "Realm of Numbers" ingenuously suggest zero stuff as origin of the Universe? I was taught that careful mathematicians add a Constant to the Zero side of differential equations. Assigning an origin to the Universe seems to be the source of trouble. It takes a powerful lack of imagination to be unable to conceive of infinity occupied by everlasting self-rearranging something, doesn't it?

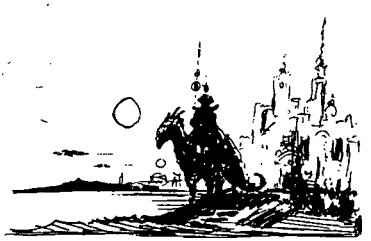
Yours very truly,

Betty B. Kingsley
Ridgefield, NJ

P.S. Your editorial on Forgetfulness is a delight . . . It's amazing to me that anybody can be so right as often as you; even though it proves my favorite theory—that counters, weighers, and measurers get it *right* more often than simple believers do.

I'm afraid I don't know enough about the mathematics of quantum mechanics to argue the point in detail, but there is something called a "false vacuum," there are conditions under which gravitation exerts a repulsive effect, and there is something that results which is called an inflationary Universe that—sorry—originates out of nothing.

—Isaac Asimov



ANNOUNCEMENTS:

The Association of Science Fiction Artists recently conferred the Chesley Awards on works that were published in 1986. We are proud to announce that the winners included:

Bob Eggleton, Best Cover, Magazines (January 1987, *IAsfm*)
and
Bob Walters, Best Interiors, Magazines (Mid-December 1986 and January 1987, *IAsfm*).

Coincidentally, both artists received their awards for the works that accompanied Michael Swanwick's novel, *Vacuum Flowers.*

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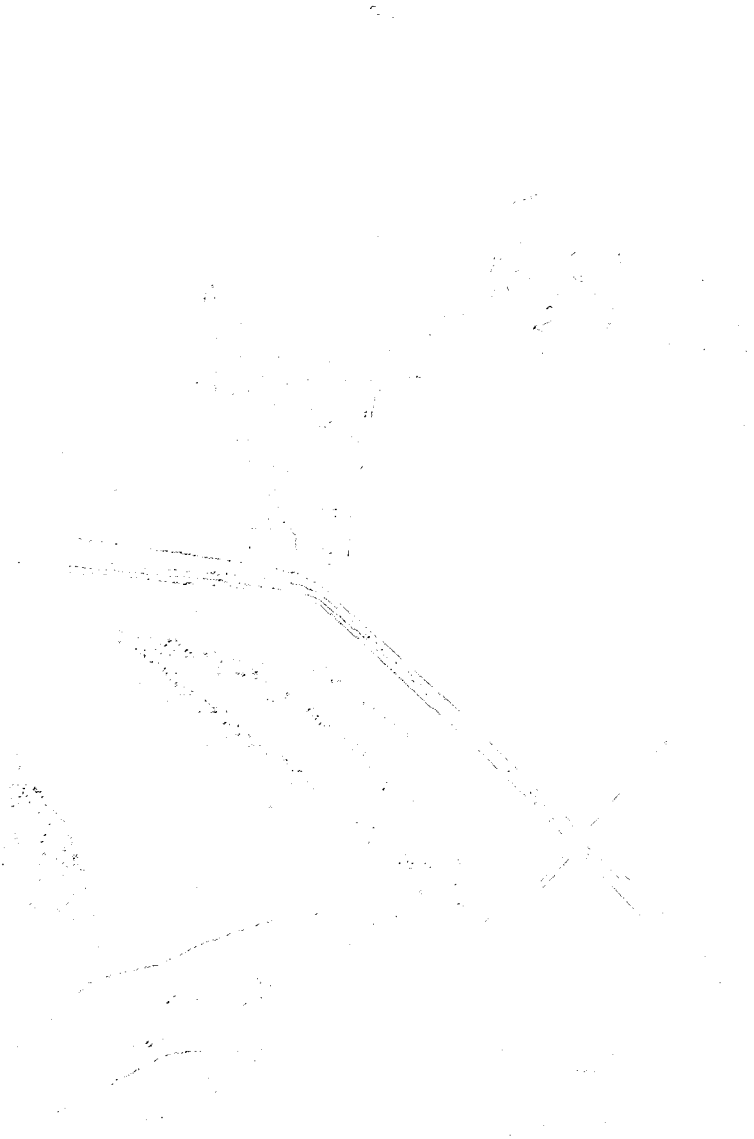

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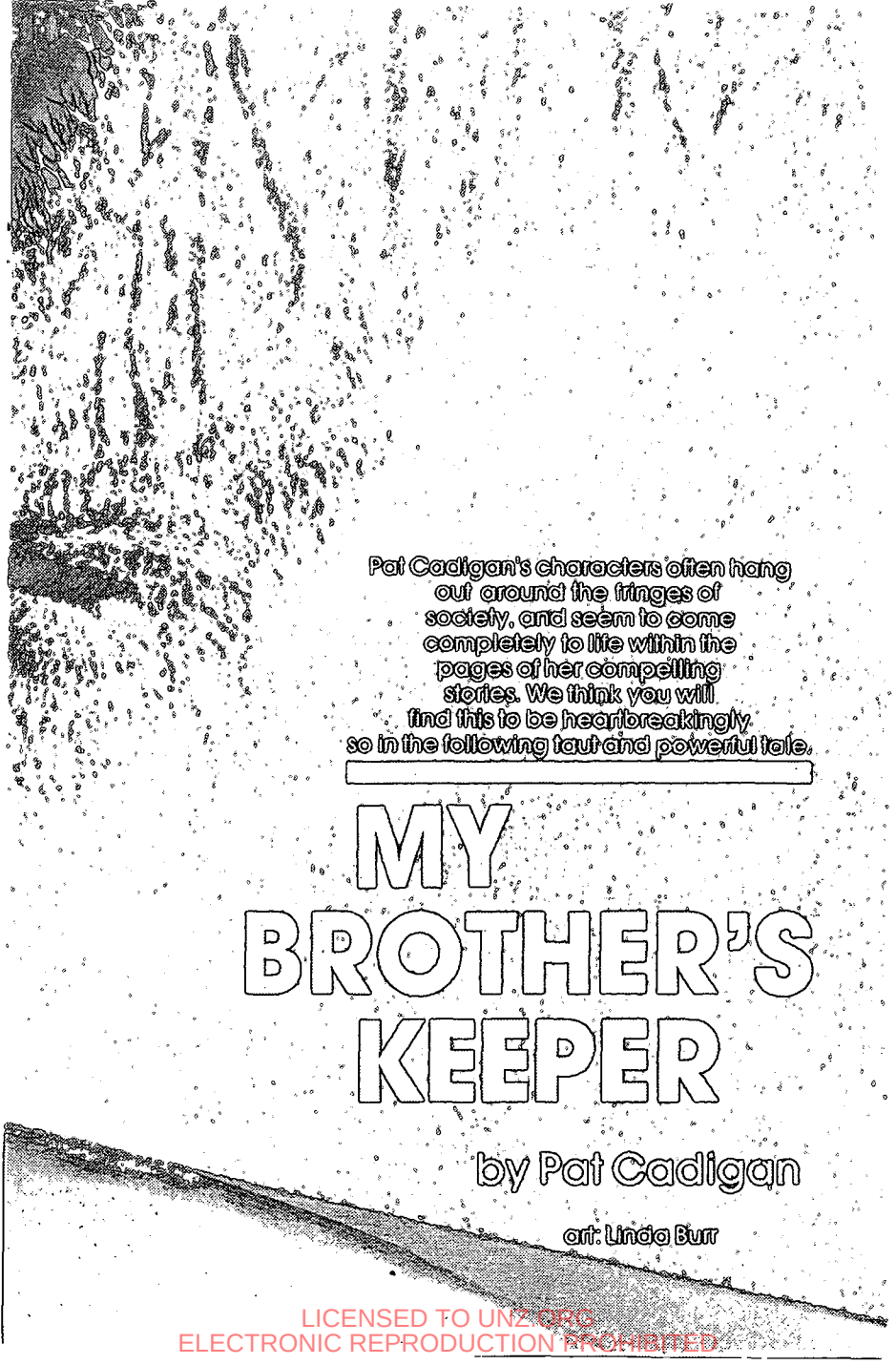
Pat Cadigan's characters often hang out around the fringes of society, and seem to come completely to life within the pages of her compelling stories. We think you will find this to be heartbreakingly so in the following taut and powerful tale.
MY BROTHER'S KEEPER
by Pat Cadigan
art: Linda Burr

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All this happened a long time ago. Exactly when doesn't matter, not in a time when you can smoke your coke and Mommy and Daddy lock their grass in the liquor cabinet so Junior can't toke up at their expense. I used to think of it as a relevant episode, from a time when lots of things were relevant. It wasn't long before everyone got burned out on relevance. Hey, don't feel too__guilty__bad__smug__perplexed. There'll be something else, you know there will. It's coming in, right along with your ship.

In those days, I was still in the midst of my triumphant rise out of the ghetto (not all white chicks are found under a suburb). I was still energized and reveling at the sight of upturned faces beaming at me, saying, "Good luck, China, you're gonna be something someday!" as I floated heavenward attached to a college scholarship. My family's pride wore out sometime after my second visit home. Higher education was one thing, high-mindedness was another. I was puffed up with delusions of better and my parents kept sticking pins in me, trying to make the swelling go down so they could see me better. I stopped going home for a while. I stopped writing, too, but my mother's letters came as frequently as ever: *Your sister Rose is pregnant again, pray God she doesn't lose this one, it could kill her; your sister Aurelia is skipping school, running around, I wish you'd come home and talk to her,* and, *Your brother Joe . . . your brother Joe . . . your brother Joe.*

My brother Joe. As though she had to identify him. I had one brother and that was Joe. My brother Joe, the original lost boy. Second oldest in the family, two years older than me, first to put a spike in his arm. Sometimes we could be close, Joe and me, squeezed between the brackets of Rose and Aurelia. He was a boner, the lone male among the daughters. Chip off the old block. Nature's middle finger to my father.

My brother Joe, the disposable man. He had no innate talents, not many learned skills other than finding a vein. He wasn't good-looking and junkies aren't known for their scintillating personalities or their sexual prowess or their kind and generous hearts. The family wasn't crazy about him; Rose wouldn't let him near her kids, Aurelia avoided him. Sometimes I wasn't sure how deep my love for him went. Junkies need love but they need a fix more. Between fixes, he could find the odd moment to wave me good-bye from the old life.

Hey, Joe, I'd say. *What the hell, huh?*

If you have to ask, babe, you don't really want to know. Already looking for another vein. Grinning with the end of a belt between his teeth.

My brother Joe was why I finally broke down and went home between semesters instead of going to suburban Connecticut with my roommate. Marlene had painted me a bright picture of scenic walks through pristine

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snow, leisurely shopping trips to boutiques that sold Mucha prints and glass beads, and then, hot chocolate by the hearth, each of us wrapped in an Afghan crocheted by a grandmother with prematurely red hair and an awful lot of money. Marlene admitted her family was far less relevant than mine, but what were vacations for? I agreed and was packing my bag when Joe's postcard arrived.

Dear China, They threw me out for the last time. That was all, on the back of a map of Cape Cod. Words were something else not at his command. But he'd gone to the trouble of buying a stamp and sending it to the right address.

The parents had taken to throwing him out the last year I'd lived at home. There hadn't been anything I could do about it then and I didn't know what Joe thought I could do about it now but I called it off with Marlene anyway. She said she'd leave it open in case I could get away before classes started again. Just phone so Mummy could break out the extra linens. Marlene was a good sort. She survived relevance admirably. In the end, it was hedonism that got her.

I took a bus home, parked my bag in a locker in the bus station and went for a look around. I never went straight to my parents' apartment when I came back. I had to decompress before I went home to be their daughter the stuck-up college snotnose.

It was already dark and the temperature was well south of freezing. Old snow lined the empty streets. You had to know where to look for the action in winter. Junkies wore coats for only as long as it took to sell them. What the hell, junkies were always cold anyway. I toured; no luck. It was late enough that anyone wanting to score already had and was nodding off somewhere. Streep's Lunch was one place to go after getting loaded, so I went there.

Streep's wasn't even half-full, segregated in the usual way—straights by the windows, hopheads near the jukebox and toilets, cops and strangers at the U-shaped counter in the middle. Jake Streep didn't like the junkies but he didn't bother them unless they nodded out in the booths. The junkies tried to keep the jukebox going so they'd stay awake but apparently no one had any quarters right now. The black and purple machine (*Muzik Master*) stood silent, its lights flashing on and off inanely.

Joe wasn't there but some of his friends were crammed into a booth, all on the nod. They didn't notice me come in any more than they noticed Jake Streep was just about ready to throw them out. Only one of them seemed to be dressed warmly enough; I couldn't place him. I just vaguely recognized the guy he was half-leaning on. I slid into the booth next to the two people sitting across from them, a lanky guy named Farmer and Stacey, who functioned more like his shadow than his girlfriend. I gave

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Farmer a sharp poke in the ribs and kicked one of the guys across from me. Farmer came to life with a grunt, jerking away from me and rousing Stacey.

"I'm awake, chrissakes." Farmer's head bobbed while he tried to get me in focus. A smile of realization spread across his dead face. "Oh. China. Hey, wow." He nudged Stacey. "It's China."

"Where?" Stacey leaned forward heavily. She blinked at me several times, started to nod out again and revived. "Oh. Wow. You're back. What happened?" She smeared her dark hair out of her face with one hand.

"Someone kicked me," said the guy I vaguely knew. I recognized him now, George Something-Or-Other. I'd gone to high school with him.

"Classes are out," I told Stacey.

Perplexed, she started to fade away.

"Vacation," I clarified.

"Oh. Okay." She hung on Farmer's shoulder as though they were in deep water and she couldn't swim. "You didn't quit?"

"I didn't quit."

She giggled. "That's great. Vacation. We never get vacation. We have to be us all the time."

"Shut up." Farmer made a half-hearted attempt to push her away.

"Hey. You kick me?" asked George Whoever, scratching his face.

"Sorry. It was an accident. Anyone seen Joe lately?"

Farmer scrubbed his cheek with his palm. "Ain't he in here?" He tried to look around. "I thought—" His bloodshot gaze came back to me blank. In the act of turning his head, he'd forgotten what we were talking about.

"Joe isn't here. I checked."

"You sure?" Farmer's head drooped. "Light's so bad in here, you can't see nothing, hardly."

I pulled him up against the back of the seat. "I'm sure, Farmer. Do you remember seeing him at all lately?"

His mouth opened a little. A thought was struggling through the warm ooze of his mind. "Oh. Yeah, *yeah*. Joe's been gone a coupla days." He rolled his head around to Stacey. "Today Thursday?"

Stacey made a face. "Hey, do I look like a fuckin' calendar to you?"

The guy next to George woke up and smiled at nothing. "Everybody get off?" he asked. He couldn't have been more than fifteen and still looked pretty good, relatively clean and healthy. The only one with a coat. Babe in Joyland.

"When did you see Joe last, Farmer?" I asked.

"Who?" Farmer frowned with woozy suspicion.

"Joe. My brother *Joe*."

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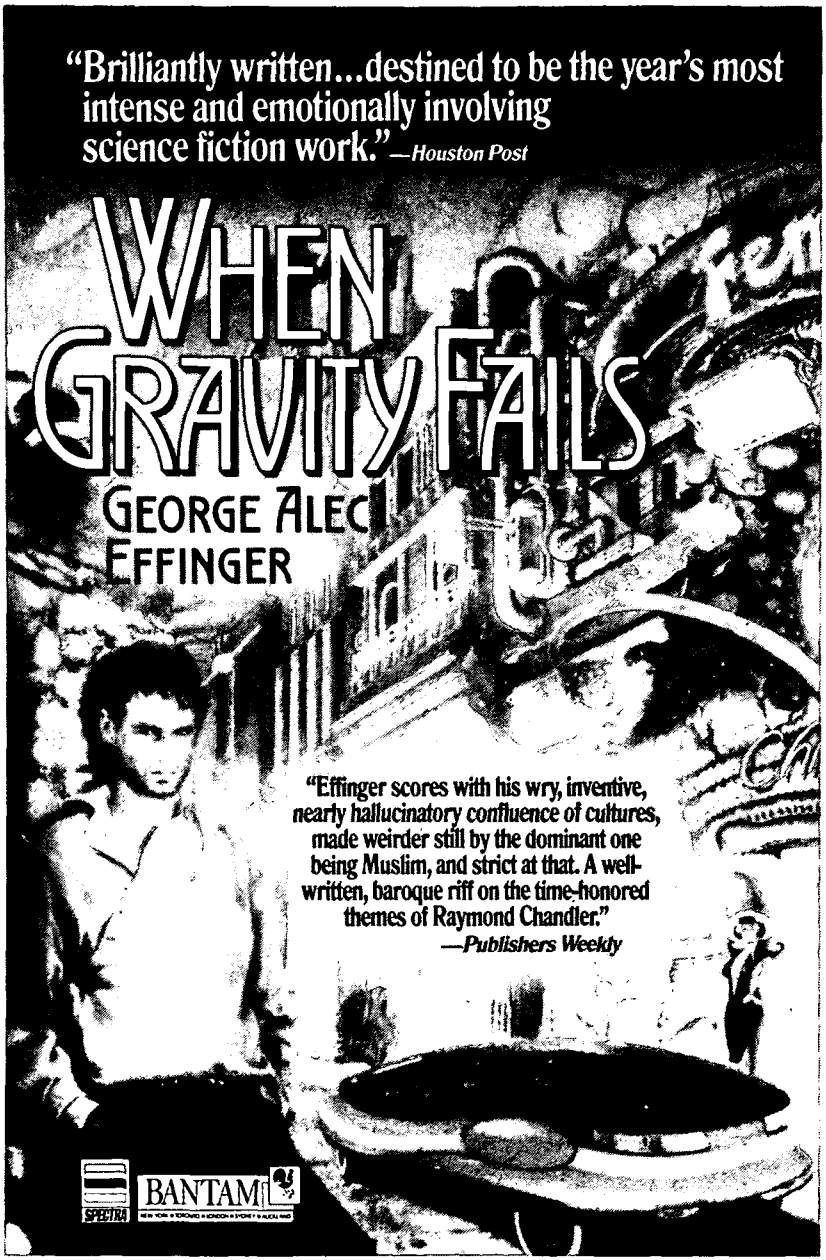
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"Joe's your brother?" said the kid, grinning like a drowsy angel. "I know Joe. He's a friend of mine."

"No, he's not," I told him. "Do you know where he is?"

"Nope." He slumped against the back of the seat and closed his eyes.

"Hey," said Stacey, "you wanna go smoke some grass? That's a college drug, ain't it? Tommy Barrow's got some. Let's all go to Tommy Barrow's and smoke grass like college kids."

"Shut *up*," said Farmer irritably. He seemed a little more alert now. "Tommy's outa town, I'm tryin' to think here." He put a heavy hand on my shoulder. "The other day, Joe was around. With this older woman. Older, you know?"

"Where?"

"You know, around. Just around. Noplace special. In here. Driving around. Just around."

I yawned. Their lethargy was contagious but I hadn't started scratching my face with sympathetic quinine itch yet. "Who is she? Anyone know her?"

"His connection. His *new* connection," Stacey said in a sudden burst of lucidity. "I remember. He said she was going to set him up nice. He said she had some good sources."

"Yeah. *Yeah*," Farmer said. "That's it. She's with some distributor or something."

"What's her name?"

Farmer and Stacey looked at me. Names, sure. "Blonde," said Farmer. "Lotta money."

"And a car," George put in, sitting up and wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Like a Caddy or something."

"Caddy, shit. You think anything ain't a Volkswagen's a Caddy," Farmer said.

"It's a big white Caddy," George insisted. "I saw it."

"I saw it, too, and it ain't no Caddy."

"Where'd you see it?" I asked George.

"Seventeenth Street." He smiled dreamily. "It's gotta tape deck."

"*Where* on Seventeenth?"

"Like near Foster Circle, down there. Joe said she's got two speakers in the back. That's so cool."

"Okay, thanks. I guess I'll have a look around."

"Whoa." Farmer grabbed my arm. "It ain't there *now*. You kidding? I don't know where they are. Nobody knows."

"Farmer, I've got to find Joe. He wrote me at school. The parents threw him out and I've got to find him."

"Hey, he's okay. I told you, he's with this woman. Staying with her, probably."

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I started to get up.

"Okay, *okay*," Farmer said. "Look, we're gonna see Priscilla tomorrow. She knows how to find him. Tomorrow."

I sighed. With junkies, everything was going to happen tomorrow. "When will you be seeing her?"

"Noon. You meet us here, okay?"

"Okay."

Streep glared at me as I left. At least the junkies bought coffee.

I thought about going down to Foster Circle anyway. It was a traffic island some idealistic mayor had decided to beautify with grass and flowers and park benches. Now it was just another junkie hang-out the straight avoided even in the daytime. It wasn't likely anyone would be hanging out there now, certainly not anyone who wanted to see me. I trudged back to the bus station, picked up my bag and went to my parents' place.

I hadn't told my parents to expect me but they didn't seem terribly surprised when I let myself in. My father was watching TV in the living room while my mother kept busy in the kitchen. The All-American nuclear salt-of-the-earth. My father didn't look at me as I peeled off my coat and flopped down in the old green easychair.

"Decided to come home after all, did you?" he said after a minute. There was no sign of Joe in his long, square face, which had been jammed in an expression of disgust since my sister Rose had had her first baby three months after her wedding. On the television, a woman in a fancy restaurant threw a drink in a man's face. "Thought you were going to Connecticut with your rich-bitch girlfriend."

I shrugged.

"Come back to see him, didn't you?" He reached for one of the beer cans on the endtable, giving it a little shake to make sure there was something in it. "What'ud he do, call you?"

"I got a postcard." On TV the drink-throwing woman was now a corpse. A detective was frowning down at her. Women who threw drinks always ended up as corpses; if she'd watched enough TV, she'd have known that.

"A postcard. Some big deal. A postcard from a broken-down junkie. We're only your parents and we practically have to get down on our knees and beg you to come home."

I took a deep breath. "Glad to see you, too. Home sweet home."

"You watch that smart mouth on you. You coulda phoned. I'd a picked you up at the bus station. It ain't like it used to be around here." My father finished the can and parked it with the other empties. "There's a new element coming in. You don't know them and they don't know you and they don't care whose sister you are. Girl on the next block, lived here all her life—raped. On the street and it wasn't hardly dark out."

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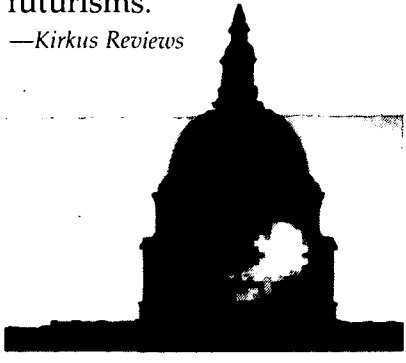

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"Who was it?"

"How the hell should I know, goddamit, what am I, the Census Bureau? I don't keep track of every urchin around here."

"Then how do you know she lived here all her life?"

My father was about to bellow at me when my mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "China. Come in here. I'll fix you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

Her face didn't change expression. "We got salami and Swiss cheese. I'll make you a sandwich."

Why not. She could make me a sandwich, I wouldn't eat it, and we could keep the enmity level up where it belonged. I heaved myself up out of the chair and went into the kitchen.

"*Did* you come home on his account?" my mother asked as I sat down at the kitchen table.

"I got a postcard from him."

"Did you." She kept her back to me while she worked at the counter. Always a soft doughy woman, my mother seemed softer and doughier than ever, as though a release had been sprung somewhere inside her, loosening everything. After a bit, she turned around holding a plate with a sandwich on it. Motherhood magic, culinary prestidigitation with ordinary salami, Swiss cheese, and white bread. Behold, the family life. Too many "Leave It to Beaver" re-runs. She set the plate down in front of me.

"I did it," she said. "I threw him out."

"I figured."

She poured me a cup of coffee. "First I broke all his needles and threw them in the trash."

"Good, Ma. You know the police sometimes go through the trash where junkies are known to live?"

"So what are they going to do, bust me and your father? Joe doesn't live here any more. I wouldn't stand for him using this place as a shooting gallery. He stole. Took money out of my purse, took things and sold them. Like we don't work hard enough for anything that we can just let a junkie steal from us."

I didn't say anything. It would have been the same if he'd been staying with me. "I know, Ma."

"So?" She was gripping the back of a chair as though she didn't know whether she wanted to throw it or pull it out and sit down.

"So what," I said.

"So what do you want with him?"

"He asked for me, Ma."

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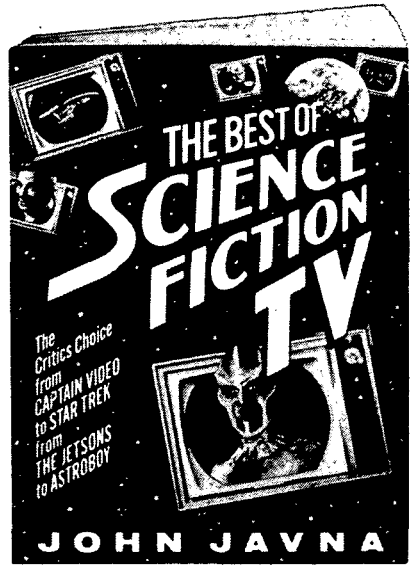
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"Oh, he asked for you. Great. What are you going to do, take him to live with you in your dorm room? Won't that be cozy."

I had an absurd picture of it. He'd have had a field day with all of Marlene's small valuables. "Where's Aurelia?"

"How should I know? We're on notice here—she does what she wants. I asked you to come home and talk to her. You wouldn't even answer my letters."

"What do you think I can do about her? I'm not her mother."

She gave me a dirty look. "Eat your sandwich."

I forced a bite and shoved the plate away. "I'm just not hungry."

"Suit yourself. You should have told me if you wanted something else."

"I didn't want something else. I didn't want anything." I helped myself to a cigarette. My mother's eyebrows went up but she said nothing. "When Aurelia comes home, I'll talk to her, okay?"

"*If* she comes home. Sometimes she doesn't. I don't know where she stays. I don't know if she even bothers to go to school sometimes."

I tapped ashes into the ashtray. "*I* was never able to get away with anything like that."

The look she gave me was unidentifiable. Her eyelids lowered, one corner of her mouth pulling down. For a few moments, I saw her as a stranger, some woman I'd never seen before who was waiting for me to figure something out and was pretty sure I was too stupid to do it.

"Okay, *if* she comes home, I'll talk to her."

"Don't do me any favors. Anyway, you'll probably be out looking for him."

"I've always been closer to him than anyone else in the family was."

My mother made a disgusted noise. "Isn't that sweet?"

"He's still a human being, Ma. And he's still my brother."

"Don't lecture to *me* about family, you. What do you think I am, the custodian here? Maybe when you go back to college, you'd like to take Joe and Aurelia with you. Maybe you'd do better at making her come home at night and keeping him off the heroin. Go ahead. You're welcome to do your best."

"I'm not their mother or father."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." My mother took a cigarette from the pack on the table and lit it. "They're still human beings, still your brother and sister. So what does that make me?"

I put my own cigarette out, picked my bag up in the living room and went to the bedroom I shared with Aurelia. She had started to spread out a little in it, though the division between her side and my side was still fairly evident. Mainly because she obviously wasn't spending a lot of time here.

For a long time, I sat on my bed fully clothed, just staring out the

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window. The street below was empty and dark and there was nothing to look at. I kept looking at it until I heard my parents go to bed. A little later, when I thought they were asleep, I opened the window a crack and rolled a joint from the stuff in the bottom drawer of my bureau. Most of the lid was still there, which meant Aurelia hadn't found it. I'd never liked grass that much after the novelty wore off, but I wanted something to blot out the bad taste the evening had left in my brain.

A whole joint to myself was a lot more than I was used to and the buzz was thick and debilitating. The smoke coiled into unreadable symbols and patterns before it was sucked out the window into the cold and dark. I thought of ragged ghosts fleeing a house like rats jumping off a sinking ship. It was the kind of dopey thought that occupies your mind for hours when you're stoned, which was fine with me. I didn't want to have to think about anything that mattered.

Eventually, I became aware that I was cold. When I could move, I reached over to shut the window and something down on the street caught my eye. It was too much in the shadows close to the building to see very well if it was even there at all. Hasher's delirium, or in this case, grasser's delirium. I tried to watch it anyway. There was a certain strength of definition and independence from the general fuzziness of my stoned eyesight, something that suggested there was more to it than the dope in my brain. Whatever it was—a dope exaggeration of a cat or a dog or a big rat—I didn't like it. Unbidden, my father's words about a new element moving in slid into my head. Something about the thing made me think of a reptile, stunted evolution or evolution reversed, and a sort of evil that might have lain thickly in pools of decay millions of years ago, pre-dating warm-blooded life. Which was ridiculous, I thought, because human beings brought the distinction between good and evil into the world. Good and evil, and stoned and not stoned. I was stoned. I went to bed.

But remember, said my still-buzzing mind as I was drifting into stupor-sleep, in order to make distinctions between any two things like good and evil, they first have to exist, don't they.

This is what happens when would-be intellectuals get stoned, I thought and passed out.

The sound of my father leaving for work woke me. I lay listening to my mother in the kitchen, waiting for the sound of bacon and eggs frying and her summons to get up and have a good breakfast. Instead, I heard water running briefly in the sink and then her footsteps going back to the bedroom and the door closing. That was new—my mother going back to bed after my father went to work, in spite of the fact that the college kid was home. I hadn't particularly wanted to talk to her anyway, es-

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pecially if it were just going to be a continuation of the previous night, but it still made me feel funny.

I washed and dressed, taking my time, but my mother never re-emerged. Apparently she was just not going to be part of my day. I left the house far earlier than I'd intended to, figuring I'd go find something to do with myself until it was time to meet Farmer and the others.

In the front vestibule of the apartment building, I nearly collided with my sister Rose, who seemed about ready to have her baby at any moment. She had dyed her hair blonde again, a cornsilk yellow color already brassing at the ends and showing dark roots.

"What are you doing home?" she asked, putting her hands protectively over her belly, protruding so much she couldn't button her coat.

"Vacation," I said. "How are you?"

"How am I ever? Pregnant."

"There *is* such a thing as birth control."

"Yeah, and there is such a thing as it not working. So?"

"Well. This is number five, isn't it?"

"I didn't know *you* were keeping score." She tried pulling her coat around her front but it wouldn't go. "It's cold down here. I'm going up to Ma."

"She went back to bed."

"She'll get up for me."

"Should you be climbing all those stairs in your condition?"

Rose lifted her plucked-to-nothing eyebrows. "You wanna carry me?" She pushed past me and slowly started up the first flight of steps.

"Come on, Rose," I called after her, "what'll happen if your bag of waters breaks or something while you're on the stairs?"

She turned to look at me from seven steps up. "I'll scream, what do you think I'll do?" She resumed her climb.

"Well, do you want me to walk up with you?" I asked, starting after her. She just waved a hand at me and kept going. Annoyed and amused, I waited until she had made the first landing and begun the next flight, wondering if I shouldn't run up after her anyway or at least stay there until I heard my mother let her in. Then I decided Rose probably knew what she was doing in a half-assed way. My theory was that she had been born pregnant and waited sixteen years until she found someone to act as father. She hadn't been much smaller than she was now when she and Roger had gotten married, much to my parents' dismay. It hadn't bothered Rose in the least.

The sun was shining brightly but there was no warmth to it. The snow lining the curb was dirtier than ever, pitted and brittle. Here and there on the sidewalk, old patches of ice clung to the pavement like frozen jellyfish left after a receding tide. It wasn't even 10:30 but I went over

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to Streep's Lunch, in case anyone put in an early appearance. That wasn't very likely but there wasn't much else to do.

Streep had the place to himself except for a couple of old people sitting near the windows. I took a seat at the counter and ordered breakfast to make up for the night before. My atonement didn't exactly impress him but he surprised me by actually speaking to me as he poured my coffee. "You home on vacation?"

"That's right," I said, feeling a little wary as I added cream from an aluminum pitcher.

"You like college?"

"It would be heaven if it weren't for the classes."

Streep's rubbery mouth twitched, shaking his jowls. "I thought that was what you went for, to go to classes and get smart."

I shrugged.

"Maybe you think you're already smart."

"Some people would say so." I smiled, thinking he should have asked my father.

"You think it's smart to keep coming around here and hanging out with junkies?"

I blinked at him. "I didn't know you cared."

"Just askin' a question."

"You haven't seen my brother Joe lately, have you?"

Streep made a fast little noise that was less than a laugh and walked away. Someone had left a newspaper on one of the stools to my right. I picked it up and read it over breakfast just for something to do. An hour passed, with Streep coming back every so often to refill my cup without any more conversation. I bought a pack of cigarettes from the machine just to have something else to do and noticed one of the old people had gone to sleep before finishing breakfast. She was very old, with frizzy grey hair and a sagging hawk nose. Her mouth had dropped open to show a few long, stained teeth. I had a half-baked idea of waking her when she gave an enormous snore. Streep didn't even look at her. What the hell, her hash browns were probably stone cold anyway. I went back to my newspaper.

When the clock over the grill said 12:10, I left some money on the counter and went outside. I should have known they'd be late, I thought. I'd probably have to stand around until close to dark, when they'd finally remember they were supposed to meet me here and not show, figuring I'd split.

A horn honked several times. George poked his head out the driver's side window of a car parked across the street. I hurried over as the back door swung open.

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"Christ, we been waiting for you," Farmer said irritably as I climbed in. "You been in there the whole time?"

"I thought you were meeting Priscilla here."

"Change of venue, you should pardon the expression," Farmer said. "Streep won't give you a cup of water to go." He was in front with George. Stacey and the kid were in the back with me. The kid didn't look so good today. He had dark circles under his eyes and wherever he'd spent the night hadn't had a washroom.

"Why aren't you in school?" I asked him.

"Screw it, what's it to you?" he said flippantly.

"Haven't been home yet, have you?"

"Chrissakes, what are you, his probation officer?" said Farmer. "Let's go, she's waiting."

The car pulled away from the curb with a jerk. George swore as he eased it into the light noon-time traffic. "I ain't used to automatics," he complained to no one.

Farmer was rummaging in the glove compartment. "Hey, there's no works in here. You got any?"

"I got them, don't worry. Just wait till we pick up Priscilla, okay?"

"Just tell me where they are."

"Don't sweat it, I told you I got them."

"I just want to know where."

"Up my ass, all right? Now let me drive."

"I'll give you up your ass," Farmer said darkly.

Stacey tapped him on the back of the head. "Come on, take it easy, Farmer. Everybody's gonna get what they need from Priscilla."

"Does Priscilla know where Joe is?" I asked.

"Priscilla knows everything," said Stacey, believing it.

Priscilla herself was standing on the sidewalk in front of a beauty parlor, holding a big Styrofoam cup. She barely waited for the car to stop before she yanked the door open and got into the front seat next to Farmer.

"You got works?" he asked as she handed him the cup. "This asshole won't tell me if he's got any."

"In a minute, Farmer. I have to say hello to China." She knelt on the front seat and held her arms out to me. Obediently, I leaned forward over the kid so she could hug me. She was as bizarre-looking as ever, with her pale pancake make-up, frosted pink lipstick, heavily-outlined eyes and flat-black hair. The junkie version of Elizabeth Taylor. She was a strange little girl in a puffy woman's body and she ran hot and cold with me, sometimes playing my older sister, then snubbing me outright, depending on Joe. They'd been on and off for as long as he'd been shooting,

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with her as the pursuer unless Joe knew for sure that she had a good connection.

Today she surprised me by kissing me lightly on the lips. It was like being kissed by a crayon. "How's our college kid?" she asked tenderly.

"Fine, Priscilla. Have you—"

"I haven't seen you since the fall," she went on, gripping the back of the seat as George pulled into the street again. "How do you like school? Are you doing real well?"

Farmer pulled her around. "This is very sweet, old home week and all, but do you have anything?"

"No, Farmer, I always stand around on the street with a cup of water. Don't spill it."

"I've got a spoon," said the kid, holding one up. Stacey took it from him.

"Me first?" she said hopefully.

Priscilla turned around and stared down her nose at her, junkie aristocracy surveying the rabble. "I understand I'm not the only one in this car with works?"

George was patting himself down awkwardly as he drove, muttering, "Shit, shit, shit."

"Asshole," said Farmer. "I knew you didn't have any."

"I *had* some, but I don't know where they are now."

"Try looking up your ass. Priscilla?"

Priscilla let out a noisy sigh. "I'm not going to do this any more. Someday we're all going to get hep and die."

"Well, *I'm* clean," the kid announced proudly.

"Keep borrowing works, you'll get a nice case of hepatitis," I said. "Joe got the clap once, using someone else's."

"Bullshit."

"Tell him whose spike it was, Stacey," I said, feeling mean. Stacey flushed.

"And you want to go first?" Priscilla said. "No way."

"That was last year, I'm cured now, honest. I don't even have a cold." She glared at me. "Please, Priscilla. Please."

Priscilla sighed again and passed her a small square of foil and a plastic syringe. "You give me anything and I'll fucking kill you, I swear."

"Here, hold this." Stacey dumped everything in the kid's lap and took the water from Farmer. "Who's got a belt?"

Somehow everyone looked at everyone else and ended up looking at me.

"Shit," I said and slipped it off. Stacey reached for it and I held it back. "Somebody tell me where Joe is or I'll throw this out the window right now."

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"China, don't be like that. You're holding things up," said Priscilla chidingly, as though I were a bratty younger sister.

"I want to know where Joe is."

"Just let us fix first, okay? Now give Stacey your belt."

Stacey snatched the belt away from me before I could say anything else and shoved her shirt and sweater sleeves high up on her arm. "Wrap it on me," she said to the kid. Her voice was getting shaky. The kid got the belt around her upper arm and pulled it snug. He had to pour a little water into the bowl of the spoon for her, too, and shake the heroin out of the foil. Someone had a ragged piece of something that had to pass for cheesecloth. Stacey fidgeted with it while the kid held a match under the spoon. When the mix in the bowl started to bubble, Stacey laid the cloth over the surface and drew some solution into the syringe. Her hands were very steady now. She held the syringe up and flicked it with her finger.

"Will you hurry it up?" Farmer snapped. "There's other people besides you."

"Keep your shirt on, I'm trying to lose some bubbles. Help me," Stacey said. "Tighten that belt."

The kid pulled the belt tighter for her as she straightened her arm. She felt in the fold of her elbow with her pinky. "There he is. Old Faithful. He shoulda collapsed long ago but he just keeps on truckin'. I heard about this guy, you know? Who shot an air bubble and he saw it in his vein just as he was nodding out, you know?" She probed with the needle, drew back the plunger and found blood. "That poor guy just kept stroking it down and stroking it down and would you believe—" her eyelids fluttered. I reached over the kid to loosen the belt on her arm. "He actually got rid of it. He's still shooting." She started to say something else and passed out.

"Jesus, Priscilla." I took the needle out of Stacey's arm. "What kind of stuff have you got?"

"Only the best. Joe's new connection. You next?" she asked the kid.

"He's not an addict yet," I said. "He can pass this time."

"Who asked you?" said the kid. "You're not my fucking mother."

"You have to mainline for two weeks straight to get a habit," I said. "Take the day off."

But he already had the belt around his arm. "No. Give me the needle."

I plunged the syringe into the cup he was holding. "You have to clean it first, jerk-off." I cranked down the window and squirted a thin stream of water into the air. "If you're going to do this anyway, you might as well do it right."

Suddenly he looked unsure of himself. "I never shot myself up before. Stacey always did me."

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I looked at her, sprawled out on his other side. "She's a big help, that girl. Looks like you're on your own. I don't give injections."

But I flicked the bubbles out of the syringe for him. It was better than watching him shoot an air bubble. He had veins like power cables.

Priscilla went next. I barely had time to clean the needle and spoon for her. Farmer fixed after her. The spoon was looking bad. I was scrubbing the mess out of it with a corner of my shirt when I noticed it was real silver. The kid's spoon. Probably stolen out of his mother's service for eight. Or maybe it was the one they'd found lodged in his mouth when he'd been born. I looked at him slumped next to Stacey, eyes half-closed, too ecstatic to smile. Was this part of the new element moving in that my father had mentioned, a pampered high school kid?

"Priscilla, are you awake?" I asked, squirting water from the needle out the window while Farmer cooked his load.

"Mmm," she said lazily.

"Do you really know where Joe is?"

She didn't answer. I dipped the needle into the water one last time and squirted a stream out the window again. It arched gracefully into the air and splattered against the passenger side window of the police car that had pulled up even with us. I froze, still holding the needle up in plain sight. Farmer was telling me to hand him the fucking spike but his voice seemed to be coming through miles of cotton batting. I was back in the buzz of the night before, the world doing a slow-motion underwater ballet of the macabre while I watched my future dribble down the window along with the water. The cop at the wheel turned his head for a year before his eyes met mine. Riding all alone, must be budget-cutting time, my mind babbled. His face was flat and I could see through the dirty glass that his skin was rough and leathery. His tongue flicked out and ran over his lips as we stared at each other. He blinked once, in a funny way, as though the lower lids of his colorless eyes had risen to meet the upper ones. A kind of recognition passed between us. Then he turned away and the police car accelerated, passing us.

"Did you see that?" I gave the needle to Farmer, who was calling me nine kinds of bastard.

"Nope," George said grimly. "And he didn't see us, neither."

I tried to laugh, as though I were in on the joke. "Oh, man. I thought for sure we were all busted."

"Times are changing."

"Don't tell me the junkies are pooling their money to buy off the cops."

Priscilla came to and sighed happily. "Somebody is. We got all the conveniences. Good dope, bad cops. Things ain't so bad around here these days."

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The kid was pulling himself up on me. I sat him up without thinking about it. "Priscilla? Do you know where Joe is? Priscilla?"

"Joe? Oh, yeah. He's at my place."

"I thought he was going around with his connection."

"He's at my place. Or he was."

George pulled the car over again as Farmer woozily began cooking his shot for him. "Let me fix and I'll drive you over there, okay?" he said, smiling thinly over his shoulder at me.

The kid threw himself over my lap and fumbled the car door open. "Wanna go for a walk," he mumbled, crawling over my legs and hauling himself upright on the door. He stood swaying and tried a few tentative steps. "Can't make it. Too loaded." I caught him and pulled him back in, shoving him over next to Stacey. He smiled at me. "You're a real nice girl, you know that? You're a real nice girl."

"Shit!" George slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "It broke, the fucking needle broke!"

"Did you fix?" asked Farmer.

"Yeah, just in time. Sorry, Priscilla." George turned to look at her and nearly fell across Farmer. "I'll find mine and give it to you. Never been used, I swear."

Priscilla made a disgusted noise.

"Hey, if everybody's happy, let's go over to Priscilla's place now," I said.

George wagged his head. "Not yet. Can't get that far, stuff was too strong. I gotta let it wear off some first. Where are we?" He opened his door and nearly fell out. "Hey, we're back near Streep's. Go there for a while, okay?" No one answered. "Okay? Go to Streep's, get some coffee, listen to some music. Okay?" He nudged Farmer. "Okay?"

"Shit." I got out, hauled the kid out after me and left him leaning on the door while I dragged Stacey out. She woke up enough to smile at me. Farmer and Priscilla found their way around the car, stumbling over each other. I looked around. A few cars passed, no one paying any attention. Here we are in scenic Junk City in the Land of Nod, where five loaded hopheads can attract no interest. What's wrong with this picture?

George reeled past me and I grabbed him, patting his pants pockets.

"What?" he said dreamily.

"Let me borrow your car."

"It's not my car. It's—" His voice trailed off as his head drooped.

"That's okay," I said, shaking him, "just give me the keys." I dug them out of his right pants pocket, giving him a thrill he was too far gone to appreciate. George wasn't wearing any underwear. "Priscilla!"

She had managed to go nearly half a block unassisted. At the sound

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of her name, she swiveled around, hugging herself against a cold she probably wasn't really feeling.

"Is Joe really at your place?"

She shrugged elaborately. "Hurry, you might catch him." Farmer went by and yanked her along with him. I watched them all weaving and staggering away from me, a ragged little group minus one, who was still leaning against the car.

"My name's Tad," he said. Probably short for tadpole, I thought. "Take me with you."

I went to call out to Farmer and the rest of them but they had already turned the corner. I was stuck with their new friend unless I chose to leave him in some doorway. He was grinning at me as he swayed from side to side. The coat was dirty now but it was still pretty nice. His gloves looked like kidskin and the boots were brand new. If I left him, I'd come back and find him up on blocks, nude. I shoved him into the back seat.

"Lie down, pass out and don't give me any trouble."

"You're a real nice girl," he mumbled.

"Yeah, we could go to the prom together in a couple of years."

The front seat was too far back for me and wouldn't move up. I perched on the edge of the broken-down cushion and just managed to reach the pedals. I got the car started but pulling out was the tricky part. I'd never learned to drive. The car itself wasn't in terrific running condition—it wanted either to stall or race. I eased it down the street in half a dozen jerks that pushed me against the steering wheel and sent the kid in back off the seat and onto the floor. He didn't complain.

Priscilla had an apartment in one of the tenements near the railroad yard. The buildings looked abandoned at first glance; at second glance, they still looked abandoned. I steered the car off the road into an unpaved area that served as a parking lot and pulled up in front of the building nearest to the tracks. In the back, my companion pulled himself up on the seat, rubbing his eyes. "Where are we?"

"Wait here," I said, getting out of the car.

He shook his head emphatically. "No, I was here last night. This is Priscilla's. It ain't safe. I should go with you." He stumbled out of the car and leaned against it, trying to look sober. "I'm okay, now. I'm just high."

"I'm not going to wait for you." I headed toward the building with him staggering after me. The heroin in his system had stabilized somewhat and he fell only three times. I kept going.

He gave up on the first flight. I left him hanging on the railing muttering to himself while I trotted up to Priscilla's place on the second floor. The door was unlocked, I knew—the lock had been broken ages ago and Priscilla wasn't about to spend good junk money on getting it fixed—but

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the sagging screen door was latched. I found a torn place in the screen and reached in to unhook it.

"Joe?" I called, stepping into the filthy kitchen. An odor of something long dead hit me square in the face, making me gag. "Joe?" I tiptoed across the room. On the sink was a package of hamburger Priscilla had probably left out to thaw and then forgotten about, three weeks before, it seemed like. I wondered how she could stand it and then remembered how she liked to brag that coke had destroyed her nose. The rest of them wouldn't care as long as they could get fixed. My stomach leaped and I heaved on the floor. It was just a bit of bile in spite of the breakfast I'd eaten but I couldn't take any more and headed for the porch.

"Whaddaya want?"

I whirled, holding my hand over my mouth and nose as my gag reflex went into action again. A large black man wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. We stared at each other curiously.

"Whaddaya want?" he asked me again.

"I'm looking for Joe," I said from behind my hand.

"I'm Joe." He scratched his face and I saw a thin line of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Wrong Joe," I said, cursing Priscilla. She knew goddam well, the con artist. What did she think, that I'd forget about finding Joe and curl up with this guy instead? Yeah, that was Priscilla all over. A Joe for a Joe, fair deal. "The Joe I'm looking for is my brother."

"I'm a brother."

"Yeah, you are. You're bleeding."

He touched his mouth and looked dully at his fingers. "I'm blood."

I nodded. "Well, if you see a white guy named Joe, he's *my* brother. Tell him China was looking for him."

"China."

"Right. China."

"China's something real fragile. Could break." His expression altered slightly and that same kind of recognition that had passed between me and the cop in the patrol car seemed to pass between us now in Priscilla's stinking kitchen.

I glanced at the rotting hamburger on the counter and suddenly it didn't look like rotting meat any more than the man standing in the doorway of Priscilla's bedroom looked like another junkie, or even a human being. He tilted his head and studied me, his eyes narrowing, and it all seemed to be going in slow motion, that underwater feeling again.

"If you ain't in some kinda big hurry, why don't you hang around," he

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said. "Here all by myself. Not too interesting, nobody to rap with. Bet you got a lot of stuff you could rap about."

Yeah, he was probably craving to find out if I'd read any good books lately. I opened my mouth to say something and the stink hit me again in the back of the throat.

"Whaddaya say, you stick around here for a while. I don't bite. 'Less I'm invited to."

I wanted to ask him what he'd bitten just recently. He touched his lip as though he'd been reading my mind and shrugged. I took a step back. He didn't seem so awfully junked-up any more and it occurred to me that it was strange that he wasn't with Priscilla instead of here, all by himself.

Maybe, I thought suddenly, he was waiting for someone. Maybe Joe was supposed to be here after all, maybe he was supposed to come here for some reason and I'd just arrived ahead of him.

I swallowed against the stink, almost choked again, and said, "Hey, did Priscilla tell you she had a friend coming by, a guy named Joe, or just a guy maybe? I mean, have you been waiting for someone?"

"Just you, babe."

I'd heard that line once or twice but it never sounded so true as it did just then. The kid's words suddenly came back to me. *This is Priscilla's. I was here last night.* Farmer must have run right over after I'd seen him, to tell her I was looking for Joe. So she decided to send me on a trip to nowhere, with Farmer and the rest of them in on it, playing out the little charade of meeting her today so I could ask her about Joe and she could run this ramadoola on me. But why? What was the point?

"No, man," I said, taking another step back. "Not me."

"You sure about that?" The voice was smooth enough to slip on, like glare ice. Ice. It was chilly in the apartment, but he didn't seem to feel it. "Must be something I can . . . help you with."

Outside, there was the sound of a train approaching in the distance. In a few moments, you wouldn't be able to hear anything for the roar of it passing.

I turned and fled out to the porch. The deadmeat smell seemed to follow me as I galloped back down the stairs and woke the kid still hanging on the bannister. "Let's go, let's get out of here."

The train was thundering past as I shoved him back into the car and pulled out.

"You find Joe?" he shouted as we bounced across the parking lot.

"Yeah, I found him. I found the wrong fucking Joe."

The kid giggled a little. "There's lots of guys named Joe."

"Thanks for the information. I'll keep it in mind." I steered the car onto the street again, unsure of what to do next. Maybe just cruise around, stopping random junkies and asking them if they'd seen Joe, or look for

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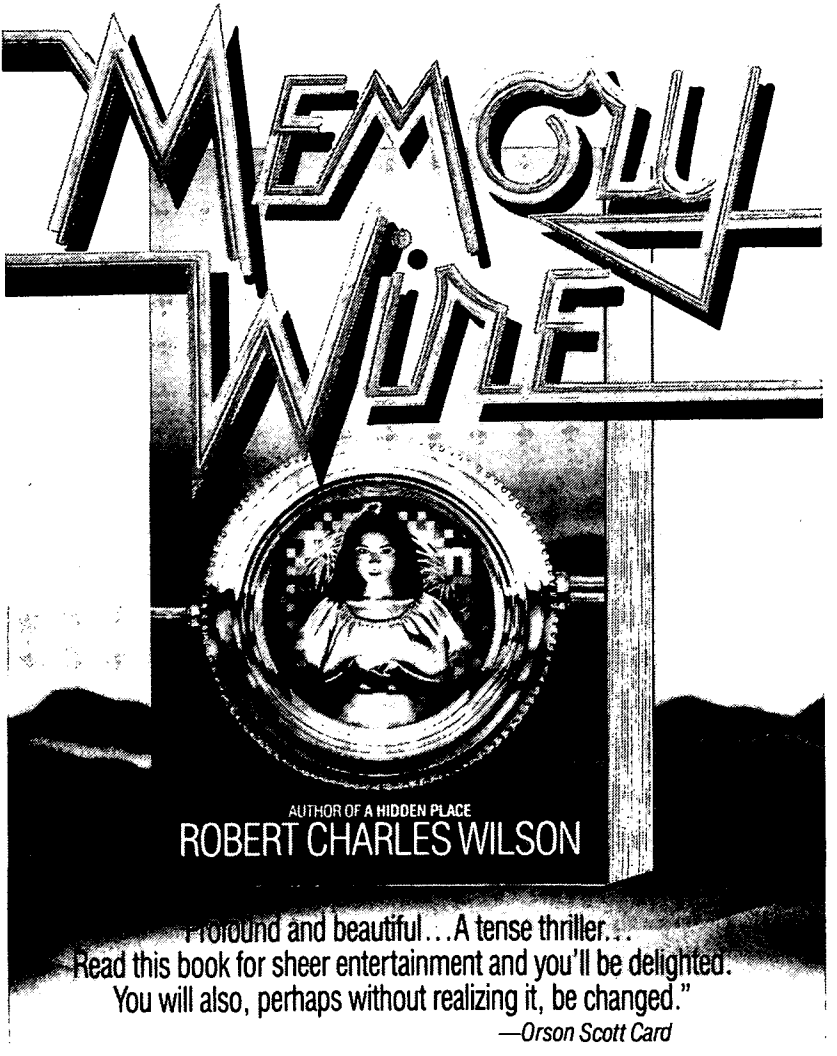
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the white Caddy or whatever it was. A white luxury car would stand out, especially if a pretty blonde woman were driving it.

The junkies were starting to come out in force now, appearing on the sidewalks and street corners. A few of them waved at the car and then looked confused when they saw me at the wheel. It seemed to me there were more new faces among the familiar ones, people I didn't even know by sight. But that would figure, I thought—had I really expected the junkie population to go into some kind of stasis while I was away at college? Every junkie's got a friend and eventually the friend's got a habit. Like the jailbait in the backseat.

I glanced in the rearview mirror at him. He was sitting up with his head thrown back, almost conscious. If I were going to find Joe or at least his ladyfriend, I'd have to dump the kid.

"Wake up," I said, making a right turn onto the street that would take me past Foster Circle and down to Streep's. "I'm going to leave you off at the restaurant with everyone else. Can you handle that?"

He struggled forward and leaned over the front seat. "But we ain't found Joe yet."

" 'Haven't found Joe yet.' What's the matter, do you just nod out in English class?"

He giggled. "Yeah. Don't everyone?"

"Maybe. I can't be hauling your ass all over with me. There's no end-of-class bell around here. You're on your own." I took another look at him as he hung over the seat, grinning at me like God's own fool. "You don't know that, do you?"

"Know what." He ruffled my hair clumsily.

"Quit that. You don't know that you're on your own."

"Shit, I got *lots* of friends."

"You've got junkies is what you've got. Don't confuse them with friends."

"Yeah?" He ruffled my hair again and I slapped his hand away. "So why are you so hot to find Joe?"

"Joe isn't my friend, he's my brother."

"Jeez, no kidding? I thought you were like his old lady or something."

How quickly they forget, junkies. I was about to answer him when I saw it, gleaming like fresh snow in the afternoon sunlight, impossibly clean, illegally parked right at the curb at Foster Circle. George had been right—it was a Caddy after all. I looked for a place to pull over and found one in front of a fire hydrant.

"Wait here," I said, killing the engine. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, you're free to go."

"Unh-unh," the kid said, falling back and fumbling for the door handle. "I'm coming with you."

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"Fuck off." I jumped out of the car and darted across two lanes of oncoming traffic, hoping the kid would pass out again before he solved the mystery of the door handle. The Caddy was unoccupied; I stepped over the low thorny bushes the ex-mayor had chosen for their red summer blooms and looked around.

At the time, it didn't seem strange that I almost didn't see her. She was sitting on a bench fifty feet away looking as immaculate as her car in a thick brown coat and spike-heeled boots. Her pale blonde hair curved over her scarf in a simple, classy pageboy, like a fashion model's. But even from where I stood, I could see she was just a bit old for a fashion model. More like an ex-fashion model, from the careful, composed way she was sitting with her ankles crossed and her tidy purse resting on her knees, except the guy on the bench next to her wasn't material for the Brut ad campaign. It was Farmer. He still looked pretty bleary but he raised one arm and pointed at me. She turned to look and her elegantly made-up face broke into that sort of cheery smile some stewardesses reserve for men who drink heavily in first class.

She beckoned with a gloved hand and I went over to them.

"Hello," she said in a warm contralto. "We've been waiting for you."

"Oh, yeah?" I said casually. "Seems like there's always someone waiting for me these days. Right, Farmer?" He was too busy staring at the woman to answer. "I thought you didn't know how to find her."

"I don't," Farmer said and smiled moonily at the woman, which pissed me off. "She found me. Kind of."

"At *Streep's*?" I didn't look right at her but I could see she was following the exchange with that same cheery smile, completely unoffended that we were talking about her in the third person.

"Nah. After you left us off, I left everybody at Streep's and came down here, figuring maybe I could find somebody who'd get in touch with Joe for you."

"Sure. Except Priscilla told me Joe was at her place. Only he wasn't. What about that, Farmer? You wanna talk about that a little? Like how you were there last night?"

Farmer could have cared less, though it was hard to see how. "Yeah, we was there. She wouldn't let us in, said she'd meet us today like we planned." He shrugged. "Anyway, I came down here and there was her car going down the street, so I flagged her down and told her you were looking for Joe. So then we came here. I figured you'd look here sooner or later because this was where I told you I saw her and Joe. And, you know, Streep's, shit, it's not a good place."

Sure wasn't, especially if you thought you could make your own connection and not have to let the rest of your junkie pals in on it directly.

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"So you decided to sit out in the cold instead." I blew out a short, disgusted breath. "I'd have gone back to Streep's, eventually."

"Well, if it got too cold, we was gonna get in the car." Farmer looked uncomfortable. "Hey, what are you bitching at me for? I found her, didn't I?"

I turned to the woman. "Where's Joe?"

Her eyes were deep blue, almost navy. "He's at my place. I understand you're his sister, China?" She tilted her head like game show women do when they're showing you the year's supply of Turtle Wax behind door number three. "I had no idea Joe had a sister in college. But I see the resemblance, you have the same eyes, the same mouth. You're very close to Joe?"

"I'd like to see him."

She spread her hands. "Then we'll go see him. All of us." She smiled past me and I turned around. The kid was standing several feet behind me, still doped up and a little unsteady but looking eager and interested in that way junkies have when they smell a possibility of more heroin. Fuck the two weeks; he'd been a junkie all his life, just like Joe.

I turned back to the woman, intending to tell her the kid was only fifteen and surely she didn't want that kind of trouble but she was already on her feet, helping Farmer up, her expensive gloves shining incongruously against his worn, dirty denim jacket.

But then again, she didn't have to touch him with her bare hands.

She made no objection when I got into the front seat with her and jerked my thumb over my shoulder instead of moving over so Farmer could get in next to me. He piled into the back with the kid and we drove off just as a meter maid pulled up next to George's car. I looked over my shoulder at the Cushman.

"Looks like we're leaving just in time," I said.

"They never ticket my car." She pushed a Grateful Dead 8-track into the tape deck and adjusted the volume on the rear speakers.

"That's funny," I said, "you don't seem like the Grateful Dead type. I'd have thought you were more of a Sinatra fan. Or maybe Tony Bennett."

"Actually, my own taste runs to chamber music," she said smoothly. "But it has very limited appeal with most of our clients. The Grateful Dead have a certain rough charm, especially in their ballads, though I will never have the appreciation for them that so many young people do. I understand they're quite popular among college students."

"Yeah, good old St. Steve," I said. "Had another hit and all that. Except that's Quicksilver Messenger Service."

"I have one of their tapes, too, if you'd prefer to hear that instead."

"No, the Dead will do."

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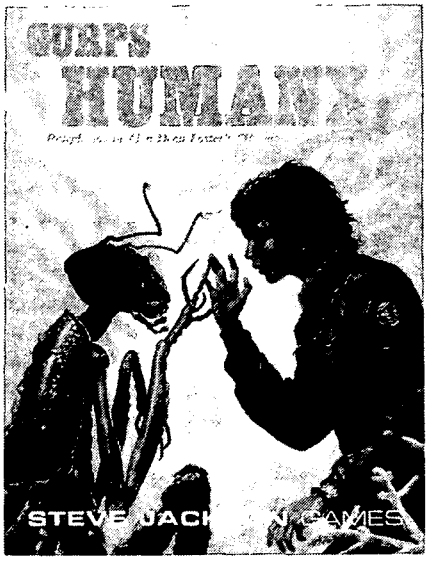

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She almost looked at me. Then Farmer called out, "This is *such* a great *car*!" and she turned up the volume slightly.

"They can't hear us," she said.

"They sure can't."

Her face should have been tired from smiling so much but she was a true professional. Don't try this at home. Suddenly I wished I hadn't. My father was right; cocky snotnosed college know-it-all. I hadn't had the first idea of what I'd gotten into here with this white Cadillac and this ex-fashion model who referred to junkies as clients but I was beginning to get a clue. We were heading for the toll bridge over the river. The thing to do was jump out as soon as she stopped, jump out and run like hell and hope that would be fast enough.

There was a soft, metallic click. Power locks.

"Such a bad area," she said. "Must always keep the doors secure when you drive through."

And then, of course, she blinked. Even with her in profile, I could see her lower eyelid rise to meet the upper one.

She used the exact change lane, barely slowing as she lowered the window and reached toward the basket. For my benefit only, I guessed; her hand was empty.

She took us to a warehouse just on the other side of the river, one of several in an industrial cluster. Some seemed to be abandoned, some not. It wasn't quite evening yet but the place was shadowy. Still, I was willing to make a run for it as soon as we stopped and fuck whatever was in the shadows, I'd take my chances that I'd be able to get away, maybe come back with the cops. After I'd given them a blink test. But she had some arrangement; no stops. While the Dead kept on trucking, she drove us right up a ramp to a garage door, which automatically rumbled upward. We drove onto a platform that had chicken wire fencing on either side. Two bright lamps hanging on the chicken wire went on. After a moment, there was a jerk and the platform began to lift slowly. Really some arrangement.

"Such a bad area," she said. "You take your life in your hands if you get out of the car."

Yeah, I thought, I just bet you did.

After a long minute, the elevator thumped to a stop and the door in front of us slid open. We were looking into a huge, elegantly furnished living room. *House and Garden* conquers the universe.

"This is it," she said gaily, killing the engine and the Dead. "Everybody out. Careful when you open the door, don't scratch the paint. Such a pain getting it touched up."

I waited for her to release the locks and then I banged my door loudly

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against the chicken wire. What the hell, I figured; I'd had it anyway. Only a cocky snotnosed college know-it-all would think like that.

But she didn't say anything to me about it, or even give me a look. She led the way into the living room and gestured at the long beige sofa facing the elevator doors, which slid closed just as Farmer and the kid staggered across the threshold.

"Make yourselves comfortable," she said. "Plenty of refreshments on the table."

"Oh, man," said Farmer, plumping down on the couch. "Can we play some more music, maybe some more Dead?"

"Patience, Farmer," she said as she took off her coat and laid it on one of the stools in front of a large mahogany wet bar. It had a mirror behind it and, above that, an old-fashioned picture of a plump woman in bloomers and a corset lounging on her side eating chocolates from a box. It was like a stage set. She watched me staring at it.

"Drink?" she said. "I didn't think people your age partook in that very much nowadays but we have a complete stock for those who can appreciate vats and vintages and whatnot."

"I'll take a shot of twenty-year-old Scotch right after you show me where Joe is."

The woman chuckled indulgently. "Wouldn't you prefer a nice cognac?"

"Whatever you think is best," I said.

"I'll be right back." She didn't move her hips much when she walked but in that cream-colored cashmere dress, she didn't have to. This was real refinement, real class and taste. Smiling at me over her shoulder one more time, she slipped through a heavy wooden door at the far end of the room next to an enormous antique secretary.

I looked at Farmer and the kid, who were collapsed on the sofa like junkie versions of Raggedy Andy.

"Oh, *man*," said Farmer, "this is *such* a great *place*! I never been in such a *great place*!"

"Yeah," said the kid. "It's so far out."

There were three silver boxes on the coffee table in front of them. I went over and opened one; there were several syringes in it, all clean and new. The box next to it held teaspoons and the one next to that, white powder. That one was next to the table lighter. I picked it up. It was an elaborately carved silver dragon coiled around a rock or a monolith or something, its wings pulled in close to its scaly body. You flicked the wheel in the middle of its back and the flame came out of its mouth. All I needed was a can of aerosol deodorant and I'd have had a flame thrower. Maybe I'd have been able to get out with a flame thrower. I doubted it.

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"Jeez, will you look at that!" said the kid, sitting up in delayed reaction to the boxes. "What a set-up!"

"This is such a *great place*!" Farmer said, picking up the box of heroin.

"Yeah, a real junkie heaven," I said. "It's been nice knowing you."

Farmer squinted up at me. "You going?"

"We're all going."

He sat back, still holding the box while the kid eyed him nervously. "You go ahead. I mean, this isn't exactly your scene anyway. But I'm hanging in."

"You just don't get it, do you? You think Blondie is just going to let you wander back out across the river with all the horse you can carry?"

Farmer smiled. "Shit, maybe she wants me to move in. I think she likes me. I get that very definite feeling."

"Yeah, and the two of you could adopt Tadpole here, and Stacey and Priscilla and George can come over for Sunday roast."

The kid shot me a dirty look. Farmer shrugged. "Hey, somebody's gotta be out there, takin' care of the distribution."

"And she throws out Joe to make room for you, right?" I said.

"Oh, yeah, Joe." Farmer tried to think. "Well, hell, this is a big place. There's room for three. More, even." He giggled again.

"*Farmer*. I don't think many people see this place and live."

He yawned widely, showing his coated tongue. "Hey, ain't we all lucky, then."

"No. We're not lucky."

Farmer stared at me for a long moment. Then he laughed. "Shit. You're crazy."

The door at the far end of the room opened again and the woman came out. "Here he is!" she announced cheerfully and pulled Joe into the room.

My brother Joe, the original lost boy, the disposable man in an ankle-length bathrobe knotted loosely at the waist, showing his bony chest. The curly brown hair was cleaner than it had been the last time I'd seen him but duller and thinner, too. His eyes seemed to be sunk deep in the sockets and his skin looked dry and flaky. But he was steady on his bare feet as he came toward me.

"Joe," I said. "It's me, Chi—"

"I know, babe, I know." He didn't even change expression. "What the fuck?"

"I got your card."

"Shit. I told you, it was for the last time."

I blinked at him. "I came home because I thought—" I stopped, looking at the woman who was still smiling as she moved behind the bar and poured a little cognac into a glass.

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"Well, go on," she said. "Tell him what you thought. And have your cognac. You should warm the bowl between your hands."

I shook my head slightly, looking down at the plush carpet. It was also beige. Not much foot traffic around here. "I thought you needed me to do something. Help you or something."

"I was saying good-bye, babe. That's all. I thought I should, you know, after everything you seen me through. I figured, what the hell, one person in the world who ever cared what happened to me, I'd say good-bye. Fucking parents don't care if they never see me again. Rose, Aurelia—like, forget it."

I looked up at him. He still hadn't changed expression. He might have been telling me it was going to snow again this winter.

"Have your cognac," the woman said to me again. "You warm the bowl between your hands like this." She demonstrated and then held the glass out to me. When I didn't move to take it, she put it down on the bar. "Perhaps you'll feel like it later." She hurried over to the couch where Farmer and the kid were rifling the syringes and the spoons. Joe took a deep breath and let it out in a not-quite sigh.

"I can tell her to let you go," he said. "She'll probably do it."

"*Probably*?" I said.

He made a helpless, impotent gesture with one hand. "What the fuck did you come here for?"

"For you, asshole. What the fuck did *you* come here for?"

Bending over the coffeetable, the woman looked back at us. "Are you going to answer that, Joe? Or shall I?"

Joe turned toward her slightly and gave a little shrug. "Will you let her go?"

That smile. "Probably."

Farmer was holding up a syringe. "Hey, I need some water. And a cooker. You got a spoon? And some cloth."

"Little early for your next fix, isn't it?" I said.

"Why wait?" He patted the box of junk cuddled in his lap.

The woman took the syringe from him and set it on the table. "You won't need any of that. We keep it around for those who have to be elsewhere—say, if you had an appointment to keep or if Joe were running an errand—but here we do it differently."

"Snort?" Farmer was disgusted. "Lady, I'm way past the snort stage."

She gave a refined little laugh and moved around the coffeetable to sit down beside him. "Snort. How revolting. There's no snorting here. Take off your jacket."

Farmer obeyed, tossing his jacket over the back of the couch. She pushed up his left shirt sleeve and studied his arm.

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"Hey, China," Farmer said, watching the woman with junkie avidity, "gimme your belt."

"No belt," said the woman. "Sit back, relax. I'll take care of everything." She touched the inside of his elbow with two fingers and then ran her hand up to his neck. "Here is actually a lot better."

Farmer looked nervous. "In the neck? You sure you know what you're doing? Nobody does it in the neck."

"It's not an easy technique to master but it's far superior to your present methods. Not to mention faster and far more potent."

"Well, hey." Farmer laughed, still nervous. "More potent, sure, I'm for that."

"*Relax*," the woman said, pushing his head back against the couch. "Joe's done it this way a lot of times, haven't you, Joe?"

I looked at his neck but I didn't see anything, not even dirt.

The woman loosened Farmer's collar and pushed his hair back, ignoring the fact that it was badly in need of washing. She stroked his skin with her fingertips, making a low, crooning noise, the kind of sound you'd use to calm a scared puppy. "There, now," she murmured close to Farmer's neck. "There it is, there's our baby. All nice and strong. That's a good one."

Farmer moaned pleasurably and reached for her but she caught his hand and held it firmly on his thigh.

"Don't squirm around now," she said. "This won't take long. Not very long."

She licked his neck.

I couldn't believe it. Farmer's dirty old neck. I'd have licked the sidewalk first. And *this* woman—I looked at Joe but he was watching the woman run her tongue up Farmer's neck and still no expression on him, as though he were watching a dull TV program he'd already seen.

Farmer's eyelids were at half-mast. He gave a small laugh. "Tickles a little."

The woman pulled back and then blew on the spot gently. "There now. We're almost ready." She took the box of heroin from his lap.

I didn't want to see this. I looked at Joe again. He shook his head slightly, keeping his gaze on the woman. She smiled at me, scooped up a small amount of heroin and put it in her mouth.

"Fucking lowlife," I said, but my voice sounded far away. The woman nodded, as if to tell me I had it right and then, fast, like a snake striking, she clamped her mouth on Farmer's neck.

Farmer jumped slightly, his eyes widening. Then he went completely slack, only the woman's mouth on him holding him up.

I opened my mouth to yell, but nothing came out. As though there was a field around me and Joe that kept us still.

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She seemed to stay like that on Farmer's neck forever. I stood there, unable to look away. I'd watched Farmer and Joe and the rest of them fix countless times. The scene played in my brain, the needle sliding into skin, probing, finding the vein and the blood tendriling in the syringe when it hit. Going for the boot because it made the rush better. Maybe this made the rush better for both of them.

Time passed and left us all behind. I'd thought it was too soon to fix again, but yeah, it would figure that she'd have to get them while they were still fucked up, so they'd just sit there and take it. Hey, was that last fix a little strange? —Strange? What's strange? Nod.

Then the woman drew her head back a little and I saw it. A living needle, like a stinger. I wished I were a fainter so I could have passed out, shut the picture off, but she held my gaze as strongly as she held Farmer. I'd come to see Joe and this was part of it, package deal. In another part of my mind, I was screaming and yelling and begging Joe to take us both out of there, but that place was too far away, in some other world where none of this was possible.

She brought her mouth down to Farmer's neck again, paused, and lifted her head. There was a small red mark on Farmer's skin, like a vaccination. She swallowed and gave me that professional smile.

"That's what he came here for," she said. "Now, shall I do the next one, Joe, or would you like to?"

"Oh, Jesus, Joe," I said. "Oh, *Jesus*."

"I don't like boys," he said. And blinked.

"Oh, *Jesus*—"

"Well, there's only one girl here for you." She actually crinkled her nose.

"No. *No,* oh, Jesus, *Joe*—" I grabbed two fistfuls of his bathrobe and shook him. He swayed in my grasp and it felt like I was shaking a store mannequin. Even in his deepest junked-out stupor, he'd been a million times more alive than he was now. My late brother Joe, the original lost boy now lost for all time, the disposable man finally disposed of.

He waited until I stopped shaking him and looked down at me. I took a step back. A dull television program he'd already seen. "Let her go, okay?"

"Now, Joe," she said, admonishing.

I bolted for the elevator but the doors didn't open. She had the power over them, over everything, junkies, me, even tollbooths. I just stood there until I felt Joe's hands on my shoulders.

"China—"

I jumped away from him and backed up against the elevator doors. There was a buzzing in my ears. Hyperventilating. In a moment, I was going to pass out and they could do whatever they liked. Standing be-

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tween Farmer comatose on the couch and the kid, who was just sitting like a junked-up lump, the woman looked bored.

"China," my brother repeated, but he didn't reach for me again.

I forced myself to breathe more slowly. The buzzing in my ears receded and I was almost steady again. "Oh, Jesus, Joe, where did you *find* these—these whatever-they-are. They're not people."

"I didn't really find them," he said. "One day I looked around and they were just there. Where they've always been."

"I never saw them before."

"You never had to. People like me and Farmer and whatsisname over there, the kid, we're the ones they come for. Not you."

"Then why did *I* find them?"

"I don't like to think about that. It's—" he fumbled for a moment. "I don't know. Contagious, I guess. Maybe someday they'll come for everyone."

"Well, that *is* in the plan," the woman said. "There are only so many Joes and Farmers in the world. Then you have to branch out. Fortunately, it's not hard to find new ways to reach new receptors." She ran a finger along the collar of her dress. "The damnedest things come into fashion and you know how that is. Something can just sweep the country."

"Let her go now," Joe said.

"But it's close to time for you, dear one."

"Take her back to Streep's. Stacey and George'll be there, maybe Priscilla. You can bring them here, leave her there."

"But, *Joe*," she said insistently, "she's *seen* us."

"So you can get her later."

I began to shake.

"*Joe*." The stewardess smile went away. "There are *rules*. And they're not just arbitrary instructions designed to keep the unwashed multitude moving smoothly through intersections during rush hour." She came around the coffeetable to him and put her hand on his arm. I saw her thumb sink deeply into the material of his bathrobe. "You *chose* this, Joe. You *asked* for it, and when we gave it to you, you agreed. And this is part of the deal."

He pried her hand off his arm and shoved it away. "No, it's not. My sister isn't a junkie. It wouldn't go right, not now. You know it wouldn't. You'd just end up with a troublesome body to dispose of and the trail would lead directly to me. Here. Because everyone probably knows she's been looking for me. She's probably asked half the city if they've seen me. Isn't that right, China." I nodded, unable to speak.

"You know we've got the cops."

"Not all of them. Not even enough of them."

The woman considered it. Then she shook her head at him as though

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he were a favored, spoiled pet. "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, I hope you know that."

"I know it," said Joe.

"I mean, in spite of everything you said. I might have decided just to work around the difficulties. It's just that I like you so much. You fit in so well. You're just so—*appropriate*." She glanced back at the kid on the couch. "Well, I hope this can wait until I take care of our other matter."

"Whatever you like," Joe said.

She turned her smile on me again but there was a fair amount of sneer in it. "I'll be with you shortly."

I turned away as she went back to the couch so I wouldn't have to see her do the kid. Joe just stood there the whole time, making no move toward me or away from me. I was still shaking a little; I could see my frizzy bangs trembling in front of my eyes. The absurd things you notice, I thought, and concentrated on them, out of focus against the background of the fabulous antique bar, trying to make them hold still. If they stopped trembling then I would have stopped shaking. The kid on the couch made a small noise, pleasure or pain or both, and I looked up at Joe, wanting to scream at him to make her stop it, but there was nothing there to hear that kind of scream. The kid was on his own; *I* was the one who really hadn't known that. We were all on our own, now.

The dead eyes stared at me, the gaze as flat as an animal's. I tried to will one last spark of life to appear, even just that greedy, gotta-score look he used to get, but it wouldn't come. Whatever he'd had left had been used up when he'd gotten her to let me go. Maybe it hadn't even been there then; maybe he'd been genuinely concerned about the problem of getting rid of my corpse. Junkies need love but they need a fix more.

Eventually, I heard the kid slump over on the couch.

"Well, come on," the woman said, going over to the bar to pick up her coat. The elevator doors slid open.

"Wait," Joe said.

I paused in the act of going toward the car and turned back to him.

"She goes back to Streep's," Joe said. "Just like I told you. And you pick up Stacey and George and Priscilla and whoever else is around if you want. But you fucking leave her off. Because I'll know if you don't."

I wanted to say his name, but I still couldn't make a sound.

Hey, Joe. What the hell.

If you have to ask, babe, you don't really want to know.

"All right, Joe," she said amiably. "I told you I'd do it your way."

His lower lids rose up and stayed shut. *Good-bye Joe.*

"Too bad you never got to drink your cognac," the woman said to me as she put on her coat. She nodded at the snifter where it still stood on the bar. "It's VSOP, you know."

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* * *

Night was already falling as she took me back across the river. She put on the Quicksilver Messenger Service tape for me. Yeah, another hit. Neither of us said anything until she pulled up in front of Streep's.

"Run in and tell them I'm waiting, will you?" she asked cheerfully.

I looked over at her. "What should I say?"

"Tell them Joe and I are having a party. They'll like that."

"You and Joe, huh? Think you'll be able to handle such an embarrassment of riches, just the two of you?"

"Oh, there'll be a few others by the time I get back. You don't think we need all that space for just the two of us, do you?"

I shrugged. "What do I know?"

"You know enough." We stared at each other in the faint light from the dashboard. "Sure you don't want to ride back? Priscilla's friend Joe will undoubtedly have arrived by the time we get there."

I took a deep breath. "I don't know what she told him about me, but it wasn't even close."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Real sure."

She stared at me a moment longer, as though she were measuring me for something. "Then I'll see you later, China."

I got out of the car and went into Streep's.

After that, I went home just long enough to pack my bag again while my father bellowed at me and my mother watched. I phoned Marlene from the bus station. She was out but her grandmother sounded happy to hear from me and told me to come ahead, she'd send Marlene out with the car.

So that was all. I went home even less after that, so I never saw Joe again. But I saw *them*. Not her, not Joe's blonde or the cop or the guy from Priscilla's apartment, but others. Apparently once you'd seen them, you couldn't *not* see them. They were around. Sometimes they would give me a nod, like they knew me. I kept on trucking, got my degree, got a job, got a life, and saw them some more.

I don't see them any more frequently these days, but no less, either. They're around. If I don't see them, I see where they've been. A lot of the same places I've been. Sometimes I don't think about them and it's like a small intermission of freedom, but it doesn't last, of course. I see them and they see me and someday they'll find the right time to come for me. So far, I've survived relevance and hedonism and I'm not a Yuppie. Nor my brother's keeper.

But I'm *something*. I was always going to be something someday. And eventually, they're going to find out what it is. ●

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...stories ho...
...ared in *IAsfm*, *F&SF*,
...and Jack and Jeanne
...ann's Vietnam anthology,
...in the Field of Fire. He's also sold
...wo novels to Tor Books. The first,
...nner Eclipse, will be published in
February, and the second, *Subterranean
Gallery*, will be published in mid-1989.

LISTEN TO MY HEARTBEAT

by Richard Paul Russo

art: J.K. Potter

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Cale sat out on the terrace café, beside the rusted metal rail so he could watch the crowded street below. Though the table was shaded, the heat rose up from the street, drifted through the railing with dust, blew in at him with the hot, dry breeze. He wore dark glasses that turned the world yellow.

A waiter dressed all in white (presumably white; the man's outfit looked yellow to Cale) brought a chilled glass and an opened bottle of dark beer to Cale's table, poured half the beer into the glass, left. Cale drank deeply, refilled the glass.

Cale, too, was dressed in light clothing—a tan, short-sleeved shirt, tan cotton pants, and deck shoes that had once been a pure white but now were brick red from the dust of the dry clay streets. Sweat coated his forehead, and he wore no hat.

The babble of voices rose from the street along with the dust, but Cale did not try to understand any of it. Then a single word erupted from the babble, emerged in relief though it was not shouted. "*Endeavor.*" Cale turned his head, listened, but the word was not repeated. He thought he could feel his heart begin pounding at the inside of his chest, catching at his breath. Then he turned back to look at his beer and tried to forget what he had heard.

Cale drank slowly, gazing out over the streets without seeing anything. He looked down at his right shoe, tapped it against the table leg. Red dust fell from the shoe, but the color didn't change. It was time to buy a new pair, he thought. Or to leave.

He did both.

First Cale booked a series of hopper flights that would take him to Frankfurt, then left the hotel and bought a new pair of white deck shoes at a shop a few blocks away. He continued to wear the old shoes, kept the new pair in its box.

The next morning he took a taxi to the airport, checked his one suitcase, then boarded the plane, carrying a small shoulder bag and the shoe box. Once the plane left the ground, Cale changed shoes, putting the old dusty red pair in the box, and the clean white pair on his feet.

Several hours later, when he arrived in Frankfurt, Cale dumped the old shoes into a trash can and bought a bottle of White Horse Scotch whiskey. He checked into the airport Sheraton, drank two thirds of the bottle while watching German-dubbed American movies; halfway through *The Trial* (a film he had never understood, drunk or sober, in any language), Cale passed out.

When he woke, Cale could not remember where he was. Gray light came in through the windows, the curtains drawn wide. Morning? After-

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noon? It didn't matter. The television was still on, almost inaudible; on the screen a cartoon woman poured a glass of low-alcohol beer for her cartoon child. Cale rolled off the bed, switched off the TV, then staggered into the bathroom.

After relieving himself, Cale undressed and climbed into the shower. He stood for a long time under the spray without moving, listening to the water against the tile and the glass door and running out the drain, trying not to think of anything at all. Then he slowly lowered himself and sat in the bottom of the stall, his knees bent, hot water streaming down his face and chest and between his legs, and quietly wept.

At the mirror, Cale ran fingers through the hair above his ears, dismayed at how much gray now nestled amid the dark brown. Too young to be graying, he thought. He breathed in deeply, tried to smile. He wasn't really that young any more, and it was already too late for some things in his life.

Cale stood at the window and looked out over the airport, at what little he could see of the city in the gray afternoon light. Frankfurt. Christ, why had he come here? Everywhere he looked was gray—the tarmac, the block-shaped buildings of steel and cement, factory smoke in the distance, dirty snow, the overcast sky. In some ways the Germans never changed; just look at all that goddamn cement. He put on the dark glasses; even sick yellow was better than all that gray.

Cale knew, of course, why he had come.

He left his hotel room, descended to the station beneath the airport, and took a train into the heart of the city.

The building was old, run-down, but at least it wasn't one of the modern apartment buildings, bunker-like monstrosities of cement and steel and tiny windows. Easily a hundred years old, probably much older, it was built of discolored stone and dark wood, with large, multi-paned windows set in carved wooden frames; empty planter boxes hung beneath many of the windows. The other buildings on both sides of the narrow street were similar, though most were in worse condition.

Cale stood in front of the old building, looking up along its face. A freezing rain had begun, was turning what little snow remained on the street to slush. Cale tried the front door. It was unlocked, and he stepped into musty darkness; when he closed the door he shut off the sounds of the rain and the city.

Magret lived on the third floor, and he hesitated at the foot of the stairs, removed his sunglasses, looked up through pale light and swirling dust. He should have called ahead, but she probably would not have seen

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him, and he could not accept that. As it was, Magret might not tell him anything about Tracy. She might not even know.

Tracy. Sometimes Cale could not remember what she looked like, though it hadn't been that long since he'd seen her—six, seven months maybe. Perhaps Magret would have a picture of her.

Cale started up the stairs. Wood creaked with each of his footsteps; the bannister was loose, moved each time he gripped it. At the top of the second flight he rested a few moments before starting down the short, dark, carpeted hall.

On the right . . . yes, number 7. The wooden door was so dark it was almost black, and it had a small opening covered by a brass plate on the inside. Cale knocked. Silence at first, then quiet rustling sounds filtered through the door, then silence again. Cale knocked again, louder.

The brass plate opened almost immediately, and an eye appeared in the opening. Magret's eye. The eye widened a moment, withdrew, the plate clanked shut. Silence again.

Cale knocked one more time. "Magret, it's Cale. Let me in, please, I want to talk to you."

"*Ja, leck mich am Asch!*" Her voice was sharp and harsh. She switched to English. "So go the hell away, you bastard!"

"Magret, please let me in."

She pounded hard on the door in response, but said nothing.

Cale waited a minute or two, then knocked again. "Magret." His voice was calm, quiet. No response. "I'm not leaving," he said. "I'm going to wait here until you let me in. I need to talk to you."

Still no response. Cale removed his overcoat, draped it over his shoulder. He backed away from the door and leaned against the wall directly opposite it, waiting. A few minutes later the small brass plate opened; Magret's eye appeared for a moment then disappeared without a word from her, the plate clinking shut. The door did not open.

He waited for nearly two hours before she finally opened the door to him. She stood in the doorway, framed by dim interior light, looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes. Smoke drifted from a cigarette between her fingers. Magret wore a black button-down sweater and a knee-length skirt, and Cale found himself staring at her right leg which was, he now remembered, artificial from the knee down. Somehow he had forgotten. The leg was flesh-colored, but it did not look natural at all, and his chest tightened, hands going cold. Cale looked back up at Magret's face; expressionless, she stepped back to let him in. As Cale stepped forward, he smelled alcohol on her breath.

"I've been drinking while you've been waiting," she said. She inhaled on her cigarette, then closed the door behind him.

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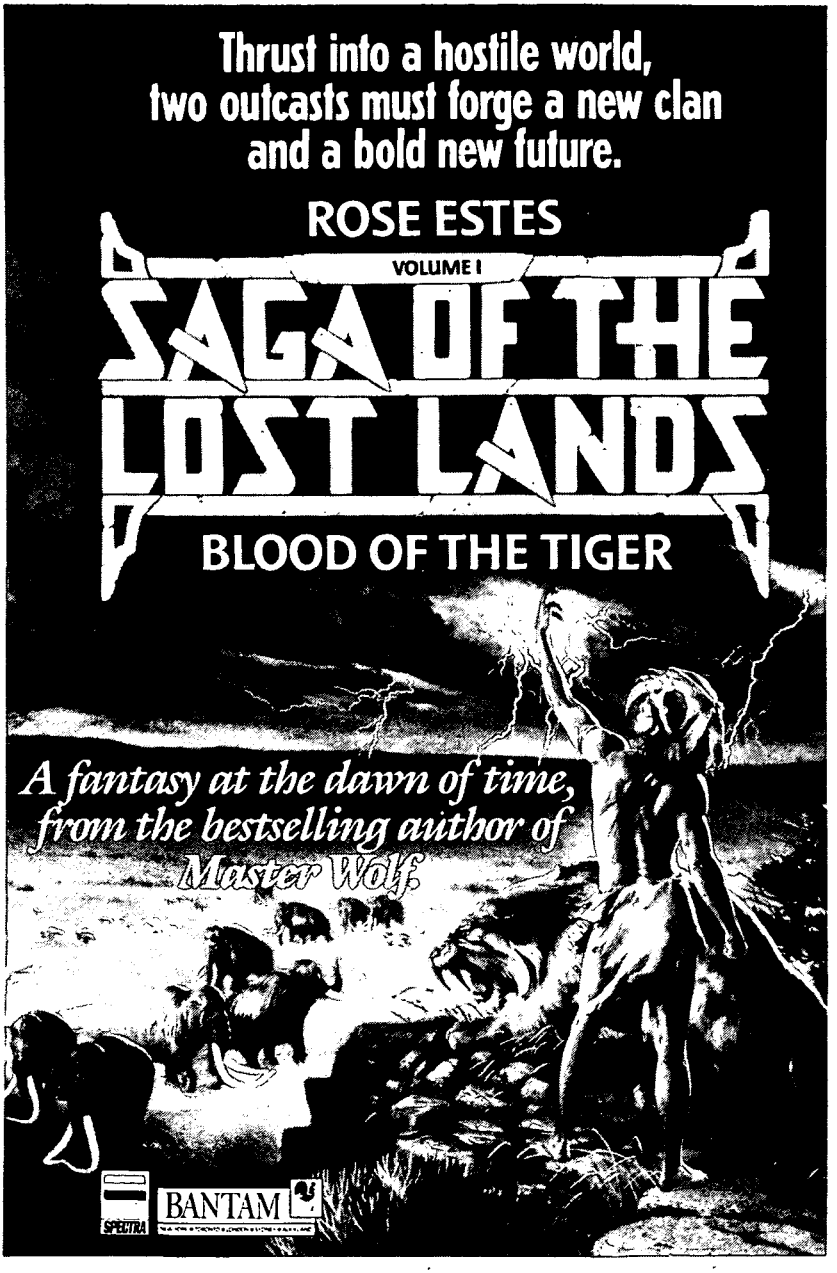

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The apartment was warm, stuffy, smelled of stale smoke and sausage. The entranceway was dark, but Magret led the way, limping slightly, toward the brighter gray light of the kitchen. The smell of sausage, bratwurst probably, intensified as Cale stepped into the small kitchen. Magret waved at the wooden table pushed up against one wall, mumbled something about sitting down, then went to the cupboard above the sink.

"You want something to drink?" she asked.

"Do you have Scotch?"

Magret laughed, nodded. In the light from the two windows, Cale could see the gray in her auburn hair, more than in his own though he was sure she was a few years younger than he. She took a glass from the cupboard, set it on the table.

"Sit down. Right back." She crushed her cigarette in the table ashtray, then limped out the side door.

Cale hung his coat over the chair, sat at the small table, and leaned against the wall. The stove, refrigerator, cupboards, ceiling, and sections of the walls were covered with a thin layer of grease. The last time he had been here, two, maybe three years before, the apartment had been much cleaner, the air fresh. Now, the sharp odor of sausage, combined with the cigarette smoke, made him slightly queasy. The glass in front of him didn't look too clean either, but he knew if Magret came back and poured Scotch into it, he would drink.

Magret returned with a half empty bottle and a full glass. She poured him half a glass, sat across the table with hers and set the bottle between them.

"I'm out of ice," she said.

"Doesn't matter." Cale sipped at the tepid Scotch, watching her. She had been attractive once, still could be again, he thought, but she'd let herself go to hell, and Cale felt vaguely guilty about it, though he knew it was not his fault; the guilt he felt about Tracy somehow carried over.

"I want to know where Tracy is," he said. "I need to get in touch with her."

"Fuck you." She said it quietly, staring at him. She took cigarettes from her sweater pocket, lit one while shaking her head. "Fuck you," she repeated, just as quietly, just as calmly.

Cale remained silent a long time. He did not know what to say. Magret continued to stare at him, eyelids drooping, smoking her cigarette and occasionally drinking from her glass. When the glass was half empty, she refilled it, added a bit more to his, though he had hardly touched it.

"You've stayed in touch with her, haven't you?" he finally asked. "You know where she is."

Magret didn't answer at first; she looked away, toward one of the windows, and her expression seemed to soften. She inhaled deeply on her

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cigarette, held it a few moments, then slowly blew out a long stream of smoke. He wondered if she was going to cry.

"You're chasing ghosts," she said. Voice soft, barely audible.

"I need to see her again. I need to talk to her."

She turned back to him, jabbed at the air with her cigarette. "You had your fucking chance." Shook her head and pounded once on the table. "You could have been with her right now, preparing to go with her, to be a part of the whole thing with her. *With* her. But you chose not to. You turned it down. You told her no."

"No," Cale said. "I couldn't decide. I was going to accept, I was . . . but . . . but it was too late."

Magret laughed quietly, shaking her head. "My ass. She told me. You *chose* not to. You rejected her." She crushed out her cigarette, ground it over and over into the ashtray. "*I* wanted to go with her. I *would* have gone, but the whole goddamn space program is still homophobic. No same-sex pairs. No 'dykes or poofs.' " She stared at him. "You wouldn't do it, but I loved her, Cale, and I would have paired with her if they had allowed it." She laughed again. "Why the hell not? My leg's already half artificial, why not go all the way, throw in an arm, whatever else? I would have been with her."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Cale said. "She wanted *me*."

"Yes, but she would have paired with me rather than go solo, I know she would have."

Cale shook his head. "No," he insisted. "She wasn't that way."

Magret pounded at the table, bloodshot eyes glaring at him. "She *would* have, you bastard."

"No." Christ, he thought, why did he keep insisting? Why was he trying to hurt her?

Magret didn't respond this time. She drank some more of the Scotch and turned away toward the window again.

"I'm sorry," Cale said. "Maybe she would have."

Magret shook her head. "No." She barely got the word out. "Probably not." Still shaking her head. "Does it really matter? For either of us? She's gone solo, that's all." She looked back at him. "You know, I lost her too."

"But you've stayed in touch with her."

"Sure." She lit another cigarette, her fingers trembling slightly. "Sure, but that just makes it harder. Don't you understand that?"

He hesitated, then nodded. That was why he'd left her, why he'd kept himself isolated all these months; but cutting himself off from Tracy hadn't resolved anything. The pain was still there, with the hollow feeling of important things still unsaid.

"Yes," he said. "I understand, but now I need to talk to her."

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Magret sighed heavily, then slowly nodded several times. She got up from the table and left the kitchen, the limp far more pronounced now, her right leg almost dragging along the floor. Again, feeling uneasy, Cale could not keep from staring.

He was tired. His eyes burned, and he was starting to feel the effects of the Scotch, but he drank more anyway. The toilet at the other end of the apartment flushed, then a couple of minutes later Magret came back into the kitchen. She handed him a folded piece of paper, then sat across from him again, refilled both of their glasses. Cale opened the paper. The address was a department number at Kennedy Space Center in Florida, of course, and there were two phone numbers with call-through codes. He refolded the paper, tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Stay with me a while," Magret said. "You're my only connection to the way she was."

"What do you mean, the way she *was*?"

"What I said before, that you're chasing ghosts. She's someone else now. Something else. Tracy's gone."

"What are you talking about?"

Magret shook her head, barely able to keep her eyes open; she drank more of the Scotch, dripping a little down her chin. "I can't tell you, go find out for yourself. But stay for a while, please, just a little?"

He nodded. "Sure."

Cale lit a fresh cigarette for her, emptied the Scotch bottle into her glass. They sat in the kitchen for a long time without speaking. Cale opened the two windows to let in the cold, fresh air, and the sounds of the city came in as well. He listened to the sounds—to a neighbor screaming at her kids; to a yelping puppy; to another neighbor playing loud ether-jazz on a stereo; to the cold rain.

When Magret passed out, Cale picked her up, staggering a little under her weight, and carried her into her bedroom where he gently laid her across the single bed, covered her with a blanket, and left.

Cale did not go directly to Florida. Instead, he flew to San Francisco, where he and Tracy had lived for nine years, and where he had last seen and talked to her.

He arrived at dawn, took a cab to their flat in the Inner Sunset, wondering if it *was* still theirs. Their names were still on the mailbox, and Cale rang the doorbell. When there was no answer, he tried his key in the porch door. The key worked, and the door opened into the staired hall leading up two flights to the top floor flat. The hall was quiet; the air, though cool, smelled musty, unused. He closed the door and started up.

At the top of the stairs, Cale stood for a minute and looked into the

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flat through the front door's glass windows. Overflowing bookcases still lined the hall, and at the far end, lit by the rising sun, he could see the old gray-topped 1950s kitchen table, the stainless steel legs shining with the light.

There was no movement at all from within, which seemed somehow wrong to him. Then he remembered Dexter, their sleek gray tomcat who would normally have padded along the hall to meet him at the door. Cale wondered what Tracy had done with him. Taken Dexter to Florida?

A second key unlocked the door, and he stepped inside. With so many large windows, the flat was bright, and very quiet. Cale walked along the hall, floorboards creaking, and glanced into the rooms as he passed them. Most of the apartment was as it had been when he'd left, but he did notice blank spots in the bookcases, bare areas on furniture and wall shelves. Later, if he felt like it, he would try to figure out what she had taken with her.

He went through the kitchen (dust on the old gas stove was highlighted in the sun) and out into the covered utility porch, then opened the back door and stepped onto the narrow outside porch. Wooden stairs descended from porch to porch and finally to the cement yard and the trash cans. Cale heard a scrabbling sound from below, followed by a rapid, ascending cluster of thumps, and Dexter appeared, running up the stairs. Dexter leaped onto the porch railing, meowed once, and rubbed his head against Cale's arm.

Cale smiled, scratched the gray cat's ears. "Where've you been, old boy? Who's been taking care of you?" Dexter purred loudly with eyes half closed, but there was no other answer.

Cale remained on the porch with Dexter a long time, talking quietly to the old gray cat in the gradually warming sun.

A week later, Cale sat in the kitchen with the phone against his ear, waiting for the final transfers to occur. It had taken three days of calls, security checks (absurd, since he'd once worked for them), line clearances, and general stalling, but they finally granted him line access to Tracy's private apartment in Florida, and now they were switching him through. A tinny click sounded, then several pops, and finally her voice came through, clear and clean.

"Hello, Cale?"

The ache rose in his chest, and he stopped breathing for a few moments, listening to the silence.

"Hello, Tracy."

A longer silence followed (he thought it was longer; his sense of time seemed to be distorted). Cale did not really know what to say, and probably Tracy didn't either.

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"How are you, Cale? Are you at home?"

"Yes. I'm fine. You?"

"I'm okay. How about Dexter? I asked Peg downstairs to take care of him."

"Sure, Dexter's fine too." He breathed in deeply, held it, then slowly exhaled. "I need to see you, Tracy."

"I'm not so sure it's a good idea."

"Maybe not. I want to see you anyway. After the last time . . . I don't know. I don't want to leave it there. I need to see you one more time before you're gone."

Another long silence passed between them. Cale watched Dexter lethargically rolling an unshelled macadamia nut around the kitchen floor, half-heartedly pouncing on it when it threatened to roll too far away.

"All right," Tracy finally said. "I'll talk to the people here, work something out, then get back to you." She paused, then, "I *do* want to see you again, Cale. I'm . . . I'm glad you called."

Cale nodded to himself. "Yeah." He paused. "I guess I'll talk to you soon, then."

"Yes. Couple of days, maybe."

He hesitated again, then said, "Tracy?"

"Yes?"

There was a final long silence, and Cale realized he just couldn't say any more to her, not over the phone.

"Talk to you," he said. "Good-bye, Tracy."

"Good-bye, Cale."

He broke the connection, but kept the phone to his ear, listening to nothing at all.

Cale had run all his credit lines to the limit, and now the checking account was empty as well. He went to their bank and closed out two CD's, stuffed the bundles of twenties and hundreds into his pockets. Tracy had called, told him when he could come, and he went to a nearby travel agency (Escape, Ltd.) where he booked a flight to Florida, paid with cash.

He wandered about the Inner Sunset, looking in the windows of shops and restaurants. Half of the businesses that had existed when he and Tracy had moved here had turned over, acquired new owners, new names, new product lines. The vitamin store was gone now, replaced by a boutique selling high-tech, electronic clothing.

Cale sat at an outdoor table at one of the Irving Street cafés, sipped at a cappucino, and thought about the money in his pockets. When this was all over he would have to go back to work. He had no idea what he would do, but he would not go back to work for NASA. They probably

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wouldn't take him back anyway, not with the way he'd walked out. Cale wondered if he'd left like that to try to sabotage Tracy's chance of getting a slot. Maybe. Probably.

It didn't matter anymore. What mattered now was seeing Tracy again, and in three days he would.

Three days. It seemed like a long, long time.

Tracy's apartment complex was isolated, not another building within a mile or two. Cale assumed it was near the Space Center, but he didn't know the area and he couldn't be sure. The building was two-storied and surrounded by lush vegetation and electrified fencing. He had been picked up at the terminal and brought out here in a small car driven by a talkative man wearing a light suit. As Cale stepped out of the car in front of the security huts, he realized he could not remember a single thing the driver had said to him.

The air was warm, humid, and the sun was bright in the thinning overcast; Cale put on his dark glasses, and the world turned yellow again. The change in color did not soothe him.

Getting through security took a half hour of identification checks, body searches, passes through detection equipment. Eventually they cleared him, gave him Tracy's apartment number—17, on the second floor—and warned him against entering any of the other apartments.

The complex was rectangular, four connected buildings enclosing a long plaza of trees, dense green growth, and spectacularly flowering plants. The apartment doors all opened onto the interior plaza. Cale climbed cement steps to the second floor landing that ran along all the buildings. From that height he could see a large swimming pool in the center of the plaza, accessed by several paths that wound through the lush vegetation. The water in the pool, discolored by his sunglasses, sparkled at him with flashing scales.

Cale walked slowly along, checking apartment numbers, glancing discreetly into windows as he passed. He stopped in front of a rust-colored door with the number "17" tacked onto it, the numerals of black-painted metal. Cale hesitated a long time, almost turned away, then firmly knocked. Almost immediately, Tracy's voice called out from within.

"Come in, Cale. The door's unlocked."

Cale hesitated again, then took the doorknob in his hand, turned it, pushed the door open. He removed the sunglasses, stepped into the tiled entry, and closed the door.

The first thing he noticed was the profusion of plants. They hung from the ceiling, jutted from wall shelves, grew in pots atop floor stands. Tracy had never cared much for plants before.

"I'm in here, Cale."

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He followed her voice through a doorway at the far end of the entry, ducked to avoid the full leaves of a hanging fern, and stepped into a large, open room filled with more plants and bright light. Then he saw her. She stood in the light streaming down through a large skylight above her, the metal surfaces of her right arm and leg shining brilliantly at him. She wore only a pair of red shorts, a white T-shirt, and her one natural foot was bare. Her black hair was cut extremely short, no more than half an inch long, and it would not lay flat.

"Hello, Cale."

"Tracy."

She looked down at his feet, smiled. "You and your spotless white deck shoes. You haven't changed."

"Magret says *you've* changed."

She looked up at him, smile fading. "Look at me." She held out her shining metal arm, silently rotated it before him, the fingers twisting and curling like beautiful steel serpents. "Of course I've changed."

Cale nodded, but didn't know how else to respond. After a long, strained and awkward silence, Tracy crossed her arms (metal over flesh), gripped her T-shirt, and pulled it off over her head, revealing her small breasts, both intact, and a wide strip of metal plating that ran the length of her right side, connecting arm to leg without a break. She remained motionless for a minute, then put her hands on the waistband of her shorts.

"Do you want to see more?"

Hints of more metal were visible around her waist and under the left leg of her shorts. "I don't know," he said.

Tracy breathed deeply once, released the waistband. "Probably not." She slipped the T-shirt back on, smiled again, softly. "I'm still me, Cale."

Cale nodded, but still said nothing.

"Listen," Tracy said. "Can I get you something to drink? Or eat?"

"Do you still eat and drink?" He smiled to let her know he was kidding, but from the look on her face he hadn't smiled soon enough. "I'm sorry," he said. "It was just a joke. Really. And a beer would be great, if you have some."

Tracy scratched at her left thigh, managed a kind of smile. "I bought some Dos Equis for you. I'll be right back."

She turned away and walked out to the entry. Cale watched her, her movements smooth and natural as if she'd been born with a metal arm and leg, lived with them all her life. Then, just before she turned the corner he looked up, saw that the metal plating curled along her shoulder and upper back, then divided into half a dozen finger-like extensions that snaked up her neck and spread out along the back of her skull and then seemed to embed themselves deep beneath her scalp. Jesus. What had she done to herself? She turned the corner and was gone.

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Cale felt his heart crashing up against the interior of his chest, pumping up through his throat, and he sat down in a stuffed chair, sank back in it. Directly above him a thick spider plant trailed about thirty or forty smaller plants from its shoots; some of the smaller plants were blooming with tiny, delicate white flowers. He wondered if he should get up and leave before Tracy came back. He remained seated, waiting for her.

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a glass of orange juice in her left hand, a bottle of Dos Equis in her right. Tracy held out the beer and Cale took it from the metal fingers. He noticed now that the metal surfaces of the fingers, the arm and leg, were irregular, marked with male and female jacks, couplings, grooved slots. Tracy sat in the couch opposite his chair. "I half expected you to be gone when I came back out just now," she said.

"I thought about it," he admitted.

"You've run away twice before."

Cale drank from his beer, tilted his head back so he could gaze out the skylight. The sky was clear now, a bright pale blue, the sun out of sight. He lowered his head to look at her again.

"That's why I'm here," he said. "No more."

Tracy nodded. They sat for a long time without speaking. Cale watched her closely. He didn't know what he was looking for—something that would indicate she was still basically the same person, or something that would indicate she wasn't. They sat and looked at each other and drank until Tracy finally broke the silence.

"Why don't we go for a walk? Maybe that'll make it easier to talk. Something."

"Where to?"

She smiled. "The plaza. They won't let us go anywhere else, not together."

"Sure."

Tracy left her glass on an end table, but Cale took his beer with him. At the front door, Cale stopped.

"Is everyone who lives here cyborged?" he asked.

"No. Just a few of us."

"And you don't mind going out like this? Without anything to cover the arm and leg?"

"Why hide it? This is what I am now. I'm not ashamed of it." She paused, held the door open for him. "Are you?"

"No." He stepped outside and Tracy closed the door behind them.

They walked along the landing in silence, descended the nearest flight of cement steps, started along a gravel path weaving through short dense trees and thickets of flowering plants. Insect and bird sounds became noticeable, loud in the silence that hung between them; there were no

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human sounds other than their own breathing and the crunch of gravel with each of their footsteps.

The path opened out onto a wide patio next to the swimming pool; half a dozen metal tables and twice as many chairs were scattered about, all empty. The place had a deserted feel. As they walked past one of the umbrella'd tables, Cale sat down, quietly set his beer bottle on the metal surface. Tracy walked on, then noticed she was alone, and stopped. She turned back to look at him, but said nothing.

"I guess I don't feel like walking," he said.

Tracy came back to the table, sat in a chair across from him. The right half of her body was in the sun, and it reflected brightly at him. He thought about putting on his dark glasses, but didn't.

"Why is this so fucking hard?" she asked.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Maybe because we both wish things could have been different, and there's no way they ever can be now." He breathed deeply once. "What we wanted wasn't the same to begin with." He turned the beer bottle so the label faced away from him; the metal foil in the label had been reflecting the sunlight into his eyes. "I guess it was hopeless from the start." Tracy said nothing; Cale went on. "And now you'll be going to the stars, plugged into one of those big starships, running a part of it."

"I'll *be* a part of it," she said. She stared at him, chewing on her lower lip, something Cale had never seen her do before. "I really wanted you to go with me," she said. "But when you took off like that . . . I had to do this, with or without you. You just didn't understand that, did you?"

He shook his head. "No. I didn't think you would do it alone, go solo. But I guess I understand now." He looked down at her right arm, which lay on the table, cold, unreal. "I just could not let them do that to me."

"And then you ran again, left me."

He turned away from her, looked out at the pool. "I couldn't watch it happen to you." There was a long silence, then he finally turned back to her. "What's it like?"

Tracy quietly laughed, breaking the tension for the moment, and shook her head. "Don't you realize that's an impossible question to answer? I'm not even going to try." She reached across the table, picked up the beer bottle, and drank, grimacing. "It's warm." She put the bottle back on the table, pushed it across to him. "It's all yours." She leaned back in her chair, apparently more relaxed. "Tell me, how's Magret? She writes a lot, once in a while we talk on the phone, but I haven't seen her in a long time."

"She looks like shit," Cale said. "She's let herself go completely to hell. I don't know. Unrequited love."

Tracy shook her head. "It's more complex than that."

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"Yes, probably. She says . . . she says you're a ghost. She says you're someone else."

Tracy shrugged, an odd gesture both because it seemed inappropriate, and because the metal shoulder did not move quite as much as the natural one did. She seemed to be tightening up again, and she looked away from him. She crossed her arms over her chest, held herself tightly.

"She thinks I've become . . . inhuman."

"Have you?"

Tracy swung her head around sharply, glared at him. "Of course not." Her voice took on a hard, coarse edge. "It's crucial that we *remain* human." She held up her left hand and arm. "That's why I still have one natural arm, one natural leg, both breasts. Shit, they could have cyborged almost everything except my head, but . . ." She opened her natural hand, looked at the spread fingers, then looked up at Cale. "I'm different now, yes, very different, but I am still *human*, dammit!" With that she raised her right hand, the metal fingers clenched into a fist, and banged it down, badly denting the metal tabletop. Tracy stared at the dent for a minute, then pushed away from the table, the chair scraping along the cement. "I *am* still human," she whispered. "I am."

Without looking at him, Tracy got up and hurried away along the gravel path, disappearing into the vegetation. A few moments later he heard the alternating metal and flesh footsteps ascending the cement steps, then saw her walking quickly along the landing until she reached her apartment. She glanced down at him for a moment, then went inside.

Once again Cale considered leaving. He sat and finished the beer, not caring that it was warm, tossed the bottle into a trash can at the edge of the patio, then started back up to the apartment.

The front door was ajar, and Cale pushed it open. He stepped inside, closed the door, and listened. The apartment seemed unnaturally quiet. He moved silently through it, searching for Tracy. There were no sounds, and the only smell was the damp earth from the plants in every room.

He found her in the bedroom. She was sitting on the floor beside the bed with her back against the wall, just below a window and a shelf of small plants. A set of stereo headphones rested on her head, covering her ears, and her right hand was encased to the wrist in a black metal box on a shelf next to the stereo amplifier. Cale could heard a faint, regular thumping of bass leaking out of the headphones.

Tracy looked up at him as he stepped into the room. He stopped, still several feet away from her, and waited. Her upper body moved regularly with her breathing.

"I *am*," she whispered, firm and pleading at the same time.

She leaned forward, her mobility restricted with her hand encased in the dark metal box. There were half a dozen lights on the exterior of the

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box, two now blinking, and several dials. Tracy removed the headphones with her left hand (the thumping bass grew a little louder), reached for the amplifier. She kept her gaze on him.

"Listen," she said. "Listen to my heartbeat."

She touched a disk on the amp, and a regular thumping emerged from large speakers in the corners of the room. "Ba-thump . . . ba-thump . . . ba-thump . . ."

"Listen," she repeated.

Cale listened. Tracy turned up the volume control, and the thumping pounded through the room, reverberating in his ears. He did not doubt for a moment that it *was* Tracy's heartbeat. It pounded all about him, strong and regular, perhaps a bit too fast.

"Listen!" she called out again, and turned up the volume once more.

Cale stared at Tracy as the sound of her heartbeat crashed through the room, rattling the windows and the mirror on the closet door, shaking the leaves of plants, shaking the clay pots, pounding through his head, vibrating his skull, and knocking petals from bright flowers.

She looked almost inhuman to him, with her metal leg and her metal arm, the hand encased in more metal, but as he watched her natural fist clenching and unclenching, watched her face twist with anguish and her left toes digging into the carpet, and watched the tears stream down her face, Cale knew she was, truly, as human as he.

"Listen!" she cried.

He listened.

Cale stayed with her through the night. She still wore the red shorts, and they lay beside each other in the large bed, not speaking, not touching. The ceiling fan rotated slowly, hardly stirring the air, and Cale spent much of the night watching it, hypnotized. He did not sleep.

Toward dawn, as Tracy slept beside him on her left side, Cale brushed his fingers along the cool metal surface of her thigh, up along her side, her shoulder, then out across the extension of metal that curled along her upper back; he hesitated at the base of her neck, then slowly traced the extensions fanning out across the back of her skull. He watched her breathe slowly, deeply, watched the pulse of the carotid in her neck.

Magret was wrong. Tracy was still there, inside that body, that mind. A little lost and confused, maybe. Changed and still changing, but Tracy nevertheless. Cale leaned forward and whispered into her ear.

"Yes, Tracy, you are."

In the morning they drank coffee while they waited to hear from Security that his ride back to the terminal had arrived. Cale had told her

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he had a mid-morning flight back to San Francisco, which wasn't true, but he was afraid to stay much longer, and he thought Tracy, too, was glad he would be leaving soon. It had been important, for both of them, that he stay the night, but much longer . . .

They sat at the kitchen table, the sun coming in through the window, fragmented by the leaves of the ferns hanging from the ceiling. Cale felt very much at ease, but distant as well, and becoming more so as the morning went on. "Do you know what ship you'll be on?" he asked.

"I'm slotted for both *Endeavor* and *Challenger II*, but I'll probably end up on *Endeavor*. We'll be the first ones out." She paused, breathed deeply once. "It'll be better then, slotted in. They'll be monitoring me, hooked into my bloodstream, they'll control the mood swings, pump me with a little of this, a little of that." She tried to smile, eventually succeeded with a quiet laugh. "I'll be fine, really." Another pause. "And you, Cale, will you be all right?"

He nodded once, then again. "Yes."

The phone rang. Tracy let it go for several rings, then got up and answered it. She listened a moment, said, "All right," then hung up.

"Your ride's here," she said.

He stood up from the table, and they walked side by side to the front door. Tracy put her arms around him and they embraced, and though he felt the metal digging into the flesh of his back, Cale really did not mind.

On his way out to the security huts, Cale detoured through the plaza to the patio and tossed his yellow-tinted sunglasses into the trash can. He would not need them anymore.

Cale climbed the wooden ladder leading up to the roof above their flat, and started across the gravel. A minute later Dexter, via the roofs of adjacent buildings, appeared and scampered along at his side.

Cale reached the far edge of the roof and sat, dangling his legs. He had wanted to watch the sunset, but the fog was starting to blow in, and would probably block out the sun before it set on its own.

Dexter crawled onto his lap, stretched and dug claws into his pants. Cale put his arm around the gray cat and scratched Dexter's head and chin, behind his ears. "Well, Tracy's gone, old boy. She won't be coming back, but I'll be staying for a while. I'm not going anywhere." Dexter started purring, pushed his head against Cale's hand.

Cale looked at the hand, then at his other hand, holding both up and flexing his fingers. He put a finger to his throat, felt the steady pulse of blood. *Listen.*

Cale sat without moving, watching the fog obscure the cool white disk of the sun . . . and listened. ●

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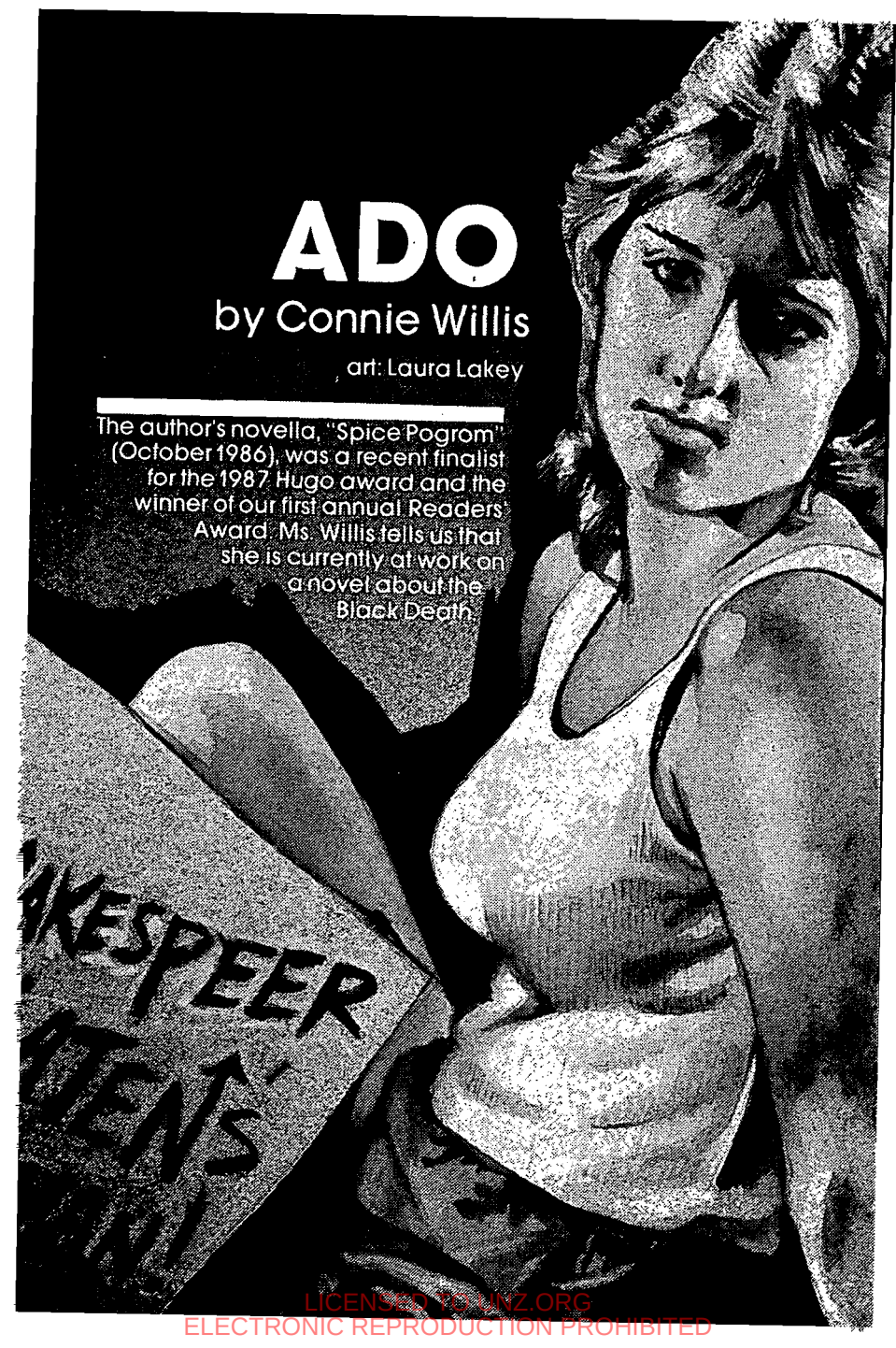
ADO

by Connie Willis

art: Laura Lakey

The author's novella, "Spice Pogrom" (October 1986), was a recent finalist for the 1987 Hugo award and the winner of our first annual Readers' Award. Ms. Willis tells us that she is currently at work on a novel about the Black Death.



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The Monday before spring break I told my English lit class we were going to do Shakespeare. The weather in Colorado is usually wretched this time of year. We get all the snow the ski resorts needed in December, use up our scheduled snow days, and end up going an extra week in June. The forecast on the *Today* show hadn't predicted any snow till Saturday, but with luck it would arrive sooner.

My announcement generated a lot of excitement. Paula dived for her corder and rewound it to make sure she'd gotten my every word, Edwin Sumner looked smug, and Delilah snatched up her books and stomped out, slamming the door so hard it woke Rick up. I passed out the release/refusal slips and told them they had to have them back in by Wednesday. I gave one to Sharon to give Delilah. "Shakespeare is considered one of our greatest writers, possibly *the* greatest," I said for the benefit of Paula's corder. "On Wednesday I will be talking about Shakespeare's life, and on Thursday and Friday we will be reading his work."

Wendy raised her hand. "Are we going to read all the plays?"

I sometimes wonder where Wendy has been the last few years—certainly not in this school, possibly not in this universe. "What we're studying hasn't been decided yet," I said. "The principal and I are meeting tomorrow."

"It had better be one of the tragedies," Edwin said darkly.

By lunch the news was all over the school. "Good luck," Greg Jefferson the biology teacher said in the teachers' lounge. "I just got done doing evolution."

"Is it really that time of year again?" Karen Miller said. She teaches American lit across the hall. "I'm not even up to the Civil War yet."

"It's that time of year again," I said. "Can you take my class during your free period tomorrow? I've got to meet with Harrows."

"I can take them all morning. Just have your kids come into my room tomorrow. We're doing 'Thanatopsis.' Another thirty kids won't matter."

" 'Thanatopsis'?" I said, impressed. "The whole thing?"

"All but lines ten and sixty-eight. It's a terrible poem, you know. I don't think anybody understands it well enough to protest. And I'm not telling anybody what the title means."

"Cheer up," Greg said. "Maybe we'll have a blizzard."

Tuesday was clear, with a forecast of temps in the sixties. Delilah was outside the school when I got there, wearing a red Seniors Against Devil Worship in the Schools T-shirt and shorts. She was carrying a picket sign that said, "Shakespeare is Satan's Spokesman." Shakespeare and Satan were both misspelled.

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"We're not starting Shakespeare till tomorrow," I told her. "There's no reason for you not to be in class. Ms. Miller is teaching 'Thanatopsis.' "

"Not lines ten and sixty-eight, she's not. Besides, Bryant was a Theist, which is the same thing as a Satanist." She handed me her refusal slip and a fat manila envelope. "Our protests are in there." She lowered her voice. "What does the word 'thanatopsis' really mean?"

"It's an Indian word. It means, 'One who uses her religion to ditch class and get a tan.' "

I went inside, got Shakespeare out of the vault in the library and went into the office. Ms. Harrows already had the Shakespeare file and her box of Kleenex out. "Do you have to do this?" she said, blowing her nose.

"As long as Edwin Sumner's in my class, I do. His mother's head of the President's Task Force on Lack of Familiarity with the Classics." I added Delilah's list of protests to the stack and sat down at the computer.

"Well, it may be easier than we think," she said. "There have been a lot of suits since last year, which takes care of *Macbeth, The Tempest, Midsummer Night's Dream, The Winter's Tale,* and *Richard III*."

"Delilah's been a busy girl," I said. I fed in the unexpurgated disk and the excise and reformat programs. "I don't remember there being any witchcraft in *Richard III*."

She sneezed and grabbed for another Kleenex. "There's not. That was a slander suit. Filed by his great-great-grand-something. He claims there's no conclusive proof that Richard III killed the little princes. It doesn't matter anyway. The Royal Society for the Restoration of Divine Right of Kings has an injunction against all the history plays. What's the weather supposed to be like?"

"Terrible," I said. "Warm and sunny." I called up the catalog and deleted *Henry IV, Parts I and II,* and the rest of her list. "*Taming of the Shrew*?"

"Angry Women's Alliance. Also *Merry Wives of Windsor, Romeo and Juliet,* and *Love's Labour's Lost*."

"*Othello*? Never mind. I know that one. *Merchant of Venice*? The Anti-Defamation League?"

"No. American Bar Association. And Morticians International. They object to the use of the word 'casket' in Act III." She blew her nose.

It took us first and second period to deal with the plays and most of the third to finish the sonnets. "I've got a class fourth period and then lunch duty," I said. "We'll have to finish up the rest of them this afternoon."

"Is there anything left for this afternoon?" Ms. Harrows asked.

"*As You Like It* and *Hamlet*," I said. "Good heavens, how did they miss *Hamlet*?"

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"Are you sure about *As You Like It*?" Ms. Harrows said, leafing through her stack. "I thought somebody'd filed a restraining order against it."

"Probably the Mothers Against Transvestites," I said. "Rosalind dresses up like a man in Act II."

"No, here it is. The Sierra Club. 'Destructive attitudes toward the environment.' " She looked up. "What destructive attitudes?"

"Orlando carves Rosalind's name on a tree." I leaned back in my chair so I could see out the window. The sun was still shining maliciously down. "I guess we go with *Hamlet*. This should make Edwin and his mother happy."

"We've still got the line-by-lines to go," Ms. Harrows said. "I think my throat is getting sore."

I got Karen to take my afternoon classes. It was sophomore lit and we'd been doing Beatrix Potter—all she had to do was pass out a worksheet on *Squirrel Nutkin*. I had outside lunch duty. It was so hot I had to take my jacket off. The College Students for Christ were marching around the school carrying picket signs that said, "Shakespeare was a Secular Humanist."

Delilah was lying on the front steps, reeking of suntan oil. She waved her "Shakespeare is Satan's Spokesman" sign languidly at me. " 'Ye have sinned a great sin,' " she quoted. " 'Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou has written.' Exodus Chapter 32, Verse 30."

"First Corinthians 13:3," I said. " 'Though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.' "

"I called the doctor," Ms. Harrows said. She was standing by the window looking out at the blazing sun. "He thinks I might have pneumonia."

I sat down at the computer and fed in *Hamlet*. "Look on the bright side. At least we've got the E and R programs. We don't have to do it by hand the way we used to."

She sat down behind the stack. "How shall we do this? By group or by line?"

"We might as well take it from the top."

"Line one. 'Who's there?' the National Coalition Against Contractions."

"Let's do it by group," I said.

"All right. We'll get the big ones out of the way first. The Commission on Poison Prevention feels the 'graphic depiction of poisoning in the murder of Hamlet's father may lead to copycat crimes.' They cite a case in New Jersey where a sixteen-year-old poured Drano in his father's ear after reading the play. Just a minute. Let me get a Kleenex. The Literature Liberation Front objects to the phrases, 'Frailty, thy name is

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woman,' and 'O, most pernicious woman,' the 'What a piece of work is man' speech, and the queen."

"The whole queen?"

She checked her notes. "Yes. All lines, references, and allusions." She felt under her jaw, first one side, then the other. "I think my glands are swollen. Would that go along with pneumonia?"

Greg Jefferson came in, carrying a grocery sack. "I thought you could use some combat rations. How's it going?"

"We lost the queen," I said. "Next?"

"The National Cutlery Council objects to the depiction of swords as deadly weapons. 'Swords don't kill people. People kill people.' The Copenhagen Chamber of Commerce objects to the line, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' Students Against Suicide, the International Federation of Florists, and the Red Cross object to Ophelia's drowning."

Greg was setting out the bottles of cough syrup and cold tablets on the desk. He handed me a bottle of valium. "The International Federation of Florists?" he said.

"She fell in picking flowers," I said. "What was the weather like out there?"

"Just like summer," he said. "Delilah's using an aluminum sun reflector."

"Ass," Ms. Harrows said.

"Beg pardon?" Greg said.

"ASS, the Association of Summer Sunbathers objects to the line, 'I am too much i' the sun,' " Ms. Harrows said, and took a swig from the bottle of cough syrup.

We were only half-finished by the time school let out. The Nuns' Network objected to the line, "Get thee to a nunnery," Fat and Proud of It wanted the passage beginning, "Oh, that this too too solid flesh should melt," removed, and we didn't even get to Delilah's list, which was eight pages long.

"What play are we going to do?" Wendy asked me on my way out.

"*Hamlet*," I said.

"*Hamlet*?" she said. "Is that the one about the guy whose uncle murders the king and then the queen marries the uncle?"

"Not anymore," I said.

Delilah was waiting for me outside. " 'Many of them brought their books together and burned them,' " she quoted. "Acts 19:19."

" 'Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me,' " I said.

It was overcast Wednesday but still warm. The Veterans for a Clean

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America and the Subliminal Seduction Sentinels were picnicking on the lawn. Delilah had on a halter top. "That thing you said yesterday about the sun turning people black, what was that from?"

"The *Bible*," I said. "Song of Solomon. Chapter one, verse six."

"Oh," she said, relieved. "That's not in the Bible anymore. We threw it out."

Ms. Harrows had left a note for me. She was at the doctor's. I was supposed to meet with her third period.

"Do we get to start today?" Wendy asked.

"If everybody remembered to bring in their slips. I'm going to lecture on Shakespeare's life," I said. "You don't know what the forecast for today is, do you?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be great."

I had her collect the refusal slips while I went over my notes. Last year Delilah's sister Jezebel had filed a grievance halfway through the lecture for "trying to preach promiscuity, birth control, and abortion by saying Anne Hathaway got pregnant before she got married." Promiscuity, abortion, pregnant, and before had all been misspelled.

Everybody had remembered their slips. I sent the refusals to the library and started to lecture.

"Shakespeare—" I said. Paula's corder clicked on. "William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon."

Rick, who hadn't raised his hand all year or even given any indication that he was sentient, raised his hand. "Do you intend to give equal time to the Baconian theory?" he said. "Bacon was not born on April 23, 1564. He was born on January 22, 1561."

Ms. Harrows wasn't back from the doctor's by third period, so I started on Delilah's list. She objected to forty-three references to spirits, ghosts, and related matters, twenty-one obscene words (obscene misspelled), and seventy-eight others that she thought might be, such as pajock and cockles.

Ms. Harrows came in as I was finishing the list and threw her briefcase down. "Stress-induced!" she said. "I have pneumonia, and he says my symptoms are stress-induced!"

"Is it still cloudy out?"

"It is seventy-two degrees out. Where are we?"

"Morticians International," I said. "Again. 'Death presented as universal and inevitable.' " I peered at the paper. "That doesn't sound right."

Ms. Harrows took the paper away from me. "That's their 'Thanatopsis' protest. They had their national convention last week. They filed a whole set at once, and I haven't had a chance to sort through them." She

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rummaged around in her stack. "Here's the one on *Hamlet*. 'Negative portrayal of interment preparation personnel—' "

"The gravedigger."

" '—And inaccurate representation of burial regulations. Neither a hermetically-sealed coffin nor a vault appear in the scene.' "

We worked until five o'clock. The Society for the Advancement of Philosophy considered the line, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," a slur on their profession. The Actors' Guild challenged Hamlet's hiring of non-union employees, and the Drapery Defense League objected to Polonius being stabbed while hiding behind a curtain. "The clear implication of the scene is that the arras is dangerous," they had written in their brief. "Draperies don't kill people. People kill people."

Ms. Harrows put the paper down on top of the stack and took a swig of cough syrup. "And that's it. Anything left?"

"I think so," I said, punching *reformat* and scanning the screen. "Yes, a couple of things. How about, 'There is a willow grows aslant a brook/ That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.' "

"You'll never get away with 'hoar,' " Ms. Harrows said.

Thursday I got to school at seven-thirty to print out thirty copies of *Hamlet* for my class. It had turned colder and even cloudier in the night. Delilah was wearing a parka and mittens. Her face was a deep scarlet, and her nose had begun to peel.

" 'Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings as in obeying the voice of the Lord?' " I asked. "First Samuel 15:22." I patted her on the shoulder.

"Yeow," she said.

I passed out *Hamlet* and assigned Wendy and Rick to read the parts of Hamlet and Horatio.

" 'The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold,' " Wendy read.

"Where are we?" Rick said. I pointed out the place to him. "Oh. 'It is a nipping and an eager air.' "

" 'What hour now?' " Wendy read.

" 'I think it lacks of twelve.' "

Wendy turned her paper over and looked at the back. "That's it?" she said. "That's all there is to *Hamlet*? I thought his uncle killed his father and then the ghost told him his mother was in on it and he said 'To be or not to be' and Ophelia killed herself and stuff." She turned the paper back over. "This can't be the whole play."

"It better not be the whole play," Delilah said. She came in, carrying her picket sign. "There'd better not be any ghosts in it. Or cockles."

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"Did you need some Solarcaine, Delilah?" I asked her.

"I *need* a Magic Marker," she said with dignity.

I got her one out of the desk. She left, walking a little stiffly, as if it hurt to move.

"You can't just take parts of the play out because somebody doesn't like them," Wendy said. "If you do, the play doesn't make any sense. I bet if Shakespeare were here, he wouldn't let you just take things out—"

"Assuming Shakespeare wrote it," Rick said. "If you take every other letter in line two except the first three and the last six, they spell 'pig,' which is obviously a code word for Bacon."

"Snow day!" Ms. Harrows said over the intercom. Everybody raced to the windows. "We will have early dismissal today at 9:30."

I looked at the clock. It was 9:28.

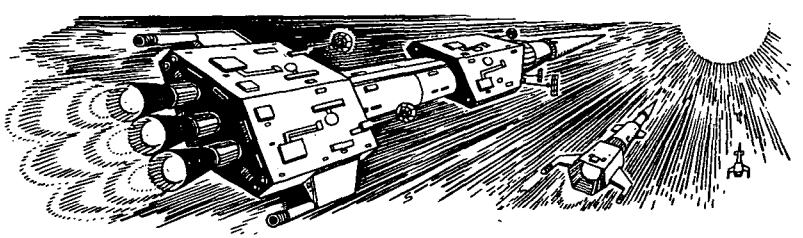
"The Over-Protective Parents Organization has filed the following protest: 'It is now snowing, and as the forecast predicts more snow, and as snow can result in slippery streets, poor visibility, bus accidents, frostbite, and avalanches, we demand that school be closed today and tomorrow so as not to endanger our children.' Buses will leave at 9:35. Have a nice spring break!"

"The snow isn't even sticking on the ground," Wendy said. "Now we'll never get to do Shakespeare."

Delilah was out in the hall, on her knees next to her picket sign, crossing out the word "man" in "Spokesman."

"The Feminists for a Fair Language are here," she said disgustedly. "They've got a court order." She wrote "person" above the crossed-out "man." "A court order! Can you believe that? I mean, what's happening to our right to freedom of speech?"

"You misspelled 'person,' " I said. ●



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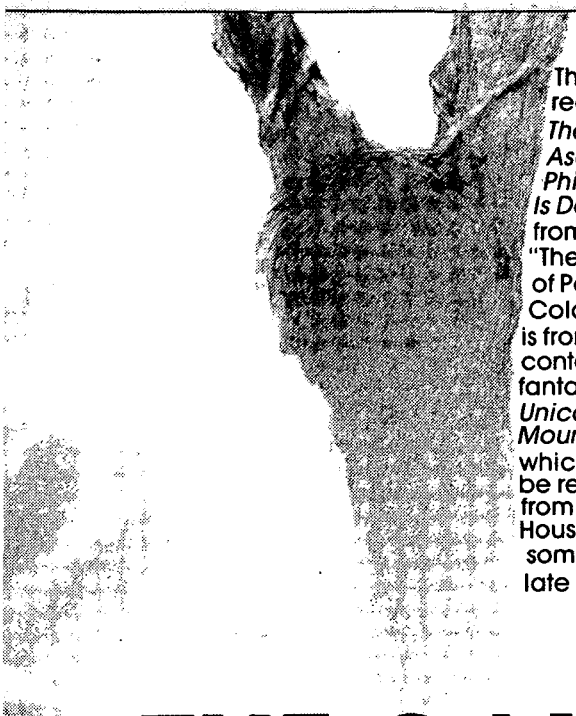

The author's most recent novel is *The Secret Ascension; or, Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas* from Tor Books. "The Calling of Paisley Coldpony" is from a contemporary fantasy, *Unicorn Mountain*, which should be released from Arbor House sometime late in 1988.

THE CALLING OF PAISLEY COLDPONY

by Michael Bishop

art: Linda Burr

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i.

In the Sun Dance lodge, she found that she was one of sixteen ghostly dancers and the only female.

Was this the second or the third day? Or the fourth of one of those controversial four-day dances decreed by Alvin Powers in the late 1970s? No. She'd been a mere child then, and the year after Powers's heart attack Sun Dancing with the Wind River Shoshones in Wyoming, DeWayne Sky had had a vision calling on the Southern Utes to go back to their traditional three-day ceremony.

But the young woman felt sure it wasn't the first day, for on the first day the center pole—the conduit of power from the Holy He-She—supported no buffalo head. Although the sun coming into the Thirst House struck so that she could not really focus on the totem lashed just beneath the crotch of the sacred cottonwood, she could see that *something* was there.

On the second day of the event, the tribal Sun Dance committee had tied it in place—an animal head now so halo-furred that she could give it no clear outline. She was praying to it, as well as to the Holy He-She, to channel water down the Tree of Life into her orphaned body so that she could do miracles. The miracle that she most wanted to do was the restoration of the health and dignity of her tribe. And of herself, too.

Which day is this? she wondered again. How much longer must I dance with these men?

In the path to the center pole next to her own path strutted Larry Cuthair. This was strange. Larry was between his junior and senior years of high school, a grade behind her.

It defied all logic that the Great Spirit had chosen Larry—in too many ways a quasi-Anglicized young man—to dance now. In fact, she would have bet that Larry was a decade or two away from such an honor, if he were going to attain to it at all, and yet he was dancing up to the Tree of Life and falling back from it in the path next to hers. She could smell not only his boyish sweat but also the chalky odor of the white paint smeared all over his belly and chest, his face, neck, and arms. The ceremonial skirt he wore, his beaded waistband, and the eagle feathers that he clutched also gleamed white—in eerie contrast to the multicolored garb of the dancers at every other Sun Dance she'd attended.

This, too, was peculiar. But, then, looking around the dance floor of the Thirst House, she saw that all the other dancers—DeWayne Sky, Brevard Mestes, Timothy Willow, *all* of them—had powdered themselves in the same alarming way. Their skirts, ivory. Their waistbands, like bone. Their bare feet, chalk-dusted and ghostly.

The impression that she had was of a room in an insane asylum for spendthrift bakers, men compelled to throw handfuls of flour into the air

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and then to frolic solemnly in the fallout. But, of course, when she looked, she saw that she (though a woman, and the sort of woman who would pester a Sun Dance chief to accept her into a ceremony once exclusively male) had followed their example. Her own body paint was white. So were her doeskin dress, her sequined apron, her eagle-bone whistle, and every bead on every necklace or bracelet adorning her person. She had joined the crazy bakers in their floury celebration, and this Sun Dance would fail because its purpose was not just to acquire power, but to appease the Old Ones already dead—to guide their spirits to rest in the ghost lands beyond the mountains. Its purpose certainly wasn't to mock the Old Ones by pretending to be an *ini 'putc'* oneself.

"Why are we dressed like ghosts?" she cried.

Her cry went unanswered. The noise of the men drumming in the corral's arbor, the guttural chanting of the men and women around the drummers, and the shuffling and shouts of encouragment from the spectators opposite the singers—all these noises kept her from being heard. But maybe that was good. She knew that to talk too much while dancing was considered folly. It cut one off from the trance state triggered by the heat, the drumming, the chanting, the pistoning of legs, the prayerful flailing of arms.

And, she knew, it was this trance state that gave one access to God's Spine, the Tree of Life, the Sacred Rood at the heart of the lodge. For only through the center pole and the totems tied to it could one take the power that every dancer coveted for the sake of the entire Sun Dance community. Maybe it was good that no one had heard her shout. Many of her neighbors already resented DeWayne Sky for letting her—a woman only recently out of high school—dance with the men. They would take great pleasure in telling everyone that she had been guilty of sacrilege, or at least of imperfect seriousness, while dancing, and that her behavior in the corral not only disgraced her and her dead mother, Dolores Arriola, but also destroyed the value of the dance for every Southern Ute. That was the more dreadful result, for all her tribespeople would ostracize her.

But so what? she thought. Ever since Mama D'lo shot herself, I've lived without their help. I don't need them and I don't want their approval. I want the Utes to be strong—to be better than they are—but if they turn their backs on me, so what? It's only what *I've* been doing to *them* since the night Mama spray-painted our walls with her brains. So I'm dancing today—my second day? my third? my fourth?—as a kind of apology for appearing not to wish them well. I *do* wish them well. I just don't want them to smother me with their fretful love.

Again, she shouted, "Why have we all made ourselves look like *ini'putc*'?"

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But the shrill piping of eagle-bone whistles and the constant thunder of drums kept everyone from hearing her. Except, she soon learned, Larry Cuthair, who strutted up and rebuked her. Did she want to screw up everything? he growled. The Old Ones would think her questions out of place, disrespectful.

"The way we look is out of place!" she countered, dancing at Larry's side. "The way we look is disrespectful!"

Larry regarded her with something like incredulity. "DeWayne Sky told us to dress and paint ourselves like this—to pretend to be our own ancestors."

"We should honor them, Larry, not mock them!"

"But he only instructed us as he did because *your* dreams—the ones you had in the spring—showed us dancing this way. It's all your doing, Paisley."

"Horseshit!" said Paisley Coldpony. She danced away from the center pole, angry at Larry for feeding her such garbage.

All her doing? How?

Yes, the Shoshones at Fort Hall sometimes used white body paint at their Sun Dances, one of which she had attended with D'lo three years ago, but it was idiotic to say that she had influenced Sky to tell every Southern Ute dancer to wear white dress and body paint because of *her* dreams.

What dreams? And why would their Sun Dance chief go along with such a major change solely on her say-so? Some people believed that three or four dancers every year lied about their dream calls, saying that they had had one when they really hadn't, and would-be dancers who went to Sky with a vision requiring novel alterations in the ceremony got looked at askance.

Besides, Paisley told herself, I *had* no dream like that. I had no such dream at all. But if not, what was she doing dancing with these men? They owed their tribe three days without food or water—solely in the hope of gaining the Great Manitou's curing powers, the repose of the dead, and their neighbors' respect. You couldn't dance without being dream-called, but Paisley had no memory of her summons. What was happening here?

Defiantly, she cried, "Why are we mocking our dead?"

An old man on the north side of the lodge shook a willow wand at her. Although Paisley had never known him to dance, he regarded himself as an expert on the ritual. The whites in Ignacio knew him as Herbert Barnes, the Utes as Whirling Goat. He had a face like a dry arroyo bottom and a voice like a sick magpie's.

"Do it right!" he taunted her. "Do it right or get out!"

Dancing toward the Tree of Life, half blinded by the sunlight pouring

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through its fork, Paisley shrieked her whistle at Whirling Goat, then gestured rudely at him. Another broken rule—but the old sot had provoked her.

"You don't know how!" he called. "You don't belong!"

"Stuff it, goat face," Larry Cuthair said, swerving out of his path toward the spectator section. Barnes retreated a step or two, pushing other onlookers aside, but halted when farther back in the crowd. From there, he croaked again for Paisley's removal—she was fouling the ceremony, turning good medicine to bad.

At that point, the gate keeper and the lodge policeman decided that Barnes was the one "fouling the ceremony" and unceremoniously removed him. Many onlookers applauded.

"Forget him," Larry whispered when next they were shoulder to shoulder on their dance paths. "He's a woman hater."

Whirling Goat confirmed this judgment by breaking free of his escorts at the western door, running back into the Thirst House, and yelling at her, "You foul the dance! You pollute the lodge!" He held his nose in a gesture implying that, against all law and tradition, she had entered the corral while in her cycle.

Many people jeered, but now Paisley couldn't tell if they were jeering Barnes or her. What hurt most was that she was clean, as her people still insisted on defining a woman's cleanliness. And Whirling Goat, a famous toss-pot often as fragrant as a distillery, could not've smelled even Larry's sister Melanie Doe's overpowering styling mousse without having a ball of it stuck directly under his nose. In any case, the gate keeper and the lodge policeman dragged him outside again.

Much aggrieved, Paisley told Larry, "He was lying."

"I know," Larry said. He smiled to show that he didn't mean to denigrate her entire gender, but the smugness of the remark ticked her off as much as had Whirling Goat's old-fashioned bigotry. She moved away from Larry, toward the backbone of the lodge. She tried to make the furry totem on the center pole resolve out of the sun's glare into a recognizable buffalo head.

Meanwhile, it amazed her to see that Tim Willow, a dancer, was wearing reflective sunglasses. His face appeared to consist of two miniature novas and a grimace. Surely, it couldn't be fair to Sun Dance thus disguised, thus protected. Or could it?

ii.

Hours passed. Paisley's thirst increased. Her throat felt the way Barnes's face looked—parched. That was to be expected; it was a *goal*

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of the dance to empty oneself of moisture so that the purer water of *Sinawef*, the Creator, could flow down the cottonwood into the lodge and finally into one's dried-out body. Thirst was natural, a door to power.

What was *not* natural, Paisley reflected, was the sun's refusal to climb the Colorado sky. It continued to hang where it had hung all morning, forty-five degrees over the eastern horizon, so that its fish-eyed disc blazed down at a slant obscuring the bison-head totem in the Tree of Life. And without eye contact, how could she or anyone else receive the sun power mediated by Buffalo?

As living ghosts, Paisley decided, we've frightened the sun.

In spite of the sun's motionless fear, time passed. You could tell by watching the spectator section of the lodge. People kept coming in and going out, a turnover that would have distracted her if she hadn't been concentrating on her dancing. But, of course, she *couldn't* concentrate on it—her worry about the whiteness of the dancers and the stuckness of the sun prevented her.

Sidelong, though, she was able to make out the faces of some of the spectators. Two of the people were whites. Although her tribe had a public relations director in Ignacio and publicly encouraged tourism, many Southern Utes had little truck with white visitors at the annual Sun Dance.

Paisley's mother had told her stories about white cultists in the 1960s, drug freaks with more interest in peyotism than the Sun Dance. They had disrupted the event by speaking gibberish at the center pole or by dancing to the point of collapse on the first day. On the first day, no *Ute* would presume to charge the sacred cottonwood, seize it, and fall down in the grip of "vision." But the "Bizarros"—the cultists' own name for themselves—had done such things and worse, thereby defiling the dance.

One of this morning's white spectators looked like a refugee from the 1960s. She wore blue jeans, a T-shirt with Bob Dylan's curly head undulating across her breasts, and a leather hat with a peace-symbol button on the brim. She was pretty, sort of, but Payz could tell that the woman was at least twenty years older than she was—two decades, an entire generation. How did that happen to people? Old Indians, even a sot like Whirling Goat, seemed to have been born old, but old whites—even middle-aged ones—often seemed to have decayed into that state.

Next to the woman stood a man. He was too young, surely, to be her husband and too old, Paisley felt, to be her son and too unlike her in appearance, she concluded, to be her brother. What did that leave? Friend? Colleague? Stranger? Whatever the relationship, he was thin—starvation-thin.

He made her think of what an Anglo male with anorexia nervosa would look like if Anglo males were ever to buy in to the grotesque lie that

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they could be attractive only if their bodies resembled those of famine victims. His eyes, which seemed too big for his head, were sunken in their sockets. Still, he had the kind of face that whites considered handsome—if only it had been less drawn, less pale.

In any case, he *wasn't* a hippie. His blondish hair was short, brushed back from his temples and forehead in a way that looked nostalgically hip. And he was wearing a long-sleeved sailcloth shirt—much too hot for July—with the legend *Coca-Cola* right across its chest.

His female companion lifted her arms, and Paisley saw that she was holding a camera—one of those kind that pop the negative out and develop it right in front of you.

Paisley nearly stopped dancing. Cameras weren't allowed in the Thirst House. People who brought them in were expelled and told not to come back. True, the Shoshones at Fort Hall and Wind River allowed cameras and recording equipment, but the Utes never had, and Paisley couldn't imagine a time when they would. Such things were products of Anglo technology. Although not bad in themselves, they had no place in the sacred corral.

A flash bulb flashed, but the flash was obscured by the sun's pinwheeling brilliance. Paisley thought she heard the camera eject the developing print, but, given the din, that wasn't likely. She *saw* the print, though. The woman in the floppy leather hat passed it to her pale companion, lifted her camera again, and triggered a second flash.

She's taking my picture, Paisley thought, half-panicked. But why? I'm nothing to her, and, besides, it isn't allowed.

Now the emaciated man was holding two prints for his companion, and she was taking a third photo. Her flash exploded impotently in the sunlight.

Someone noted the flash, though. DeWayne Sky, five dancers to Paisley's right, stopped strutting and waved his arms over his head like a man trying to halt traffic on a busy street.

It took a moment, but the Ute men at the drum, seeing their Sun Dance chief's gesture, lifted their sticks. Immediately, all the singers stopped singing.

For the first time since the ordeal had begun—whenever that may have been—Paisley could hear other noises from the camping areas and shade houses around the lodge: bread frying in skillets, children skylarking, adults playing the hand-and-stick game.

"Seize her," the ghostly-looking Sky commanded the gate keeper and the lodge policeman.

Some of the Ute onlookers near the woman grabbed her arms as if she might try to run, but she stood like a stone. "I'm sorry," she said, em-

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barrassed by the abrupt halting of the dance. "Have I done something wrong?"

No one spoke. An Indian man, a visiting Jicarilla Apache, took her camera from her and passed it to another man and so on all the way out of the lodge—as if, Paisley thought, it were a bomb.

"Hey!" the skinny Anglo said, but the Apache who had seized the camera silenced him with a scowl.

"Not allowed," Sky said to everyone and no one. Then the woman was in the custody of the gate keeper and the policeman, who began strong-arming her toward the Thirst House door.

Her male friend, although no one had touched him or ordered his eviction, started to follow, but the woman said, "I'm the one who's broken the rules, Bo. You don't have to come with me."

"Not allowed," Sky repeated loudly. He padded across the dusty lodge to look at the man. He pointed his eagle feather-wand. "You can't stay, either," he said.

Why? Paisley wondered, suddenly sympathetic to the visitors. I know that cameras aren't permitted, but what has that poor skinny man done, Chief Sky? Do you deem him guilty because he's here with the woman?

And then she realized that the man—"Bo"—was still holding the developing prints. Ah, of course. It would be a sacrilege to let him depart with them.

Larry Cuthair ambled to the rail of the spectator section and thrust out his hand for the squares of solution-glazed cardboard. The skinny man surrendered them to Larry as if they meant nothing to him. Maybe they didn't.

"Now he can stay, can't he?" Paisley said. These words escaped her altogether unexpectedly. She was as embarrassed by them as she would have been if Whirling Goat had been right about her dancing during her period. Every pair of eyes in the Thirst House turned toward her.

"No, he may not," DeWayne Sky said imperiously. "He, too, has trespassed against the Holy He-She—he, too."

"How?" Paisley challenged him.

"It's all right," the white man said. "I'll go with Lib. Just let me by."

No one moved—not the powder-white dancers, not the drummers and singers, not the onlookers. The gatekeeper and the policeman stood motionless at the gate, holding the woman who had brought the dance to a halt by taking photographs. Meanwhile, the stalled sun shone down on this tableau like a huge static flash.

"He's come here for a reason!" Paisley shouted. "He's come to us for healing!"

How do I know that? she wondered. Nevertheless, she did. She had simply intuited that this skinny Anglo had presented himself at the Sun

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Dance in humility and hope. He was a white, granted, but he was also a sincere candidate for shamanization at the hands of Sky or one of the other newly empowered dancers. So this must be the *last* day of the three-day ceremony. He had come on the third day to keep from having to endure the whole ordeal, an ordeal for which he lacked the strength; meanwhile, the woman, his friend, had accompanied him to provide moral support. It was just too bad that her curiosity—not malice or greed—had led her to carry in the prohibited camera.

"His reasons mean nothing," Sky said. "His crime is bringing moisture into the Thirst House."

"Moisture?" Paisley said. "His hands are empty."

"There," said Sky, pointing the tip of his eagle feather at the man's shirt. "Right there."

Paisley gaped. Sky meant the advertising legend on the young man's jersey—that inescapable soft drink. Even the *name* of the product, because the product was a beverage, was forbidden in the Thirst House. Paisley recalled that once she had seen a fellow Ute expelled because he was wearing a T-shirt advertising a well-known beer. On that occasion, though, the expulsion had seemed okay, for the man had known better. Later, wearing an unmarked shirt, he had returned to a fanfare of catcalls. But this man was a visitor, and his embarrassment would keep him from coming back.

"That's stupid," she said. "Anyone with spit in their mouths would have to leave."

"It's okay," the Anglo said. "I'm going."

DeWayne Sky glared at Paisley. "Spit is a part of who we are. *That*—" gesturing at the brand name on his jersey—"is no part of our bodies. It is *no* part of who we are."

You forget, Paisley mused, that there are soft-drink machines at the Ute Pino Nuche restaurant and motel in Ignacio. And you forget that right here on our camp grounds, there are motor homes with refrigerators full of canned drinks.

"What are you sick with?" Paisley asked Bo.

He hesitated a moment before saying, but when he said, everyone looked at him with new eyes—fear-filled eyes. People moved away from him, parting like that sea in the Bible.

"You can't catch it just by standing next to him," the woman in the floppy hat said. "That's not the way it works."

"Take him out," Sky commanded.

Neither the gatekeeper nor the lodge policeman moved.

"I can take myself out," the Anglo said. "Too bad, though—I've been kicked out of places a lot less interesting."

He walked the gauntlet of appalled and fascinated Indians. But as soon

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as he and the woman had left the Thirst House, ranks closed again. Sky waved for the drummers and singers to resume. Paisley watched the other dancers, including a subdued Larry Cuthair, begin to strut back and forth in their well-trampled paths to the center pole. So she began to jog-dance again, too. The sun still hadn't made any progress in its noonward ascent, and its fiery disk still blurred the animal head tied to the pole.

After a while, Larry strutted up beside Paisley and handed her two developed prints from the white woman's camera. Paisley held them at arm's length, squinting at them as she danced. The images on the slick squares would not resolve any better than would the totem on the center pole. But a fearful uneasiness welled in her—not because the skinny man had a fatal disease—but because Sky had not let him stay. It seemed to her that even though Bo was white, and whites had done little for her people but lash them more tightly to the follies of the past forty years, he owed it to *this* white man to try to heal him.

To Larry's surprise and dismay, Paisley tore up the photographs he had given her. The pieces fluttered to the floor of the Thirst House, where they were quickly ground into the dust by rhythmically shuffling feet.

After that, Paisley lost all consciousness of onlookers—they faded totally from sight. She was a spirit, a powder-white spirit, dancing with other such spirits, and she had the disturbing feeling that she was seeing the event not through her own eyes, but instead through those of the emaciated, dying Anglo.

At last, the sun began to climb. As it did, Paisley, knowing herself on the brink of vision, approached the Tree of Life with more vigor. The other dancers recognized how close she was, and Tim Willow began to compete with her, strutting, flailing his arms, making his mirrored lenses pinwheel dizzyingly.

Paisley ignored him. She was dancing faster, driving harder at the pole, urging herself to attack and touch. Only if she *touched* the sacred tree would the waters of the Holy Manitou flow into her, empowering her in ways that might one day benefit them all.

For her final run, she retreated to the backbone of the Thirst House. She lifted her eyes to the glittering eyes of the totem on the center pole. The sun had ceased to blind her, and what she saw hanging where a buffalo head should hang was not Buffalo but . . . something else. Paisley refused to flee. She screamed—not like a frightened woman, but like a warrior—then rushed the pole with such uncompromising fury that all the other ghostly dancers stopped to watch, shrilling their eagle bones.

"Mother!" she cried. "Mother!"

God's Spine staggered her with a jolt of power. She collapsed at its base.

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The vacuum left in heaven by this discharge of power sucked her spirit up after it. High above Ignacio, Colorado, she eventually regained consciousness. Her cold body, however, lay far below, a small white effigy in the Thirst House.

How strange, she mused, seeing herself and being seen, dreaming herself and being dreamt.

iii.

Paisley could sense someone kneeling over her cold body, a hand on her brow. It seemed to be the skinny Anglo whom Sky had run out of the Thirst House for wearing a Coca-Cola shirt, just as he had banished that hippie woman for taking pictures.

But when Paisley opened her eyes, reflexively grabbing at this ghost, she found that she was lying on her pallet in her house five miles outside of Ignacio. It wasn't early July, the week of the Sun Dance, but April, and her wood-frame house was cold, just as it had been every night since her mother's suicide.

You've dreamed again, the young woman told herself. Your dream is a call. No one will want you to dance, least of all an old fart like Whirling Goat, and only a bit more a stiff traditionalist like DeWayne Sky, but you've got to face down their opposition. Mama D'lo's an Old One now—it's she who's calling you to dance.

Paisley didn't know the hour, only that it was the middle of a cold weekday night, near Easter. She had school tomorrow, but she couldn't wait until tomorrow to settle this matter. In the empty house, a shell of walls and doors, she dressed as warmly as she could and set off toward Ignacio. The nearby houses of the Willows and the Cuthairs, as ramshackle as chicken coops, brooded by the roadway in the windy dark.

As she walked, carrying her school books so that she would not have to return for them, she pulled her poncho tight and thought about her dream. This was the seventh time she'd had it, or a variation of it, since her mother's suicide. She couldn't ignore the fact that the Old Ones—or, at least, the Old One that D'lo had become—wanted her to dance this July.

That troubled her, for she had planned to leave the reservation the day after her high-school graduation to search for her father. A delay of a month—thirteen years after her parents' divorce—ought not to weigh so heavily on her, but just waiting until the end of school was proving harder than she'd thought. Another month or so would seem an eternity.

Coming into the commercial section of town owned by Anglo and Chicano business people, she strolled along Main Street past the drugstore,

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a café, the laundromat. The sidewalk was mostly dark and deserted, but as she neared the dim foyer of a bar, two boys—young men, if she wanted to be generous—fell out of the place, staggered toward her grinning, and spread their arms to make it hard for her to get around them without stepping into the street. She knew them as former classmates, moderately well-heeled dropouts with damn little to do.

"Hey, Payz, how 'bout taking a ride with Howell and me?"

"How 'bout *givin'* us a little ride?"

The dreariness of the confrontation, the stupidness of it, made Paisley's dander rise, but she replied only, "Let me by."

"No, missy. Can't do that," Howell said.

"You know us," Frank said. "We're not exactly strangers."

"You're too drunk to drive or ride, either one, Frank."

Frank cursed her roundly, but without viciousness, surprising her by staggering past as if she weren't worth another minute of their valuable time. Tall and burly, he was supporting the gangly, lean Howell in a way that reminded her of a bear trying to push a potted sapling along.

Grateful for their short attention spans, Paisley strolled on toward Pine River, the Pino Nuche motel-restaurant, and the diffuse Ute enclave north of town where DeWayne Sky lived.

But, a moment later, some sort of pointy-nosed sports car with flames pin-striped on its flanks pulled up beside her, Frank at the wheel. Howell, meanwhile, was lolling in the shotgun seat like a mannikin stolen from a tall-and-thin men's shop. Frank paced her up Main Street at ten miles per hour, his head half out the window and his mouth slurring a variety of one- or two-syllable activities that he seemed to think she would enjoy sharing with him.

Paisley wasn't amused. She had business in Ignacio. And she was tired of hearing Anglos throw around words like *papoose, squaw*, and *wampum* as if they were something other than clichés or insults, especially the way Frank was deploying them. She told him to fuck off and declined to speak to him again. At the next cross street, though, Frank blew his horn, turned directly across her path, and dialed up the volume of a song on his tape player whose lyrics were nothing but orgasmic grunts. The pulsing bass of this song put the empty street a-tremble. Even the besotted Howell came around long enough to open his mouth and pop his eardrums.

"Get out of my way!" Paisley shouted. "Move it!"

Frank replied with an elaborate pantomine involving his fingers and tongue. All that she could think to do to show her outrage and contempt was to grab up an official city trash container at the end of the sidewalk and hurl it with all her might at Frank's car. It was a feat that, even as she performed it, astonished her—mostly because the four-sided recep-

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tacle, featuring a detachable metal top with a swinging door, had not been emptied recently and weighed at least fifty pounds. When it hit the car, it clattered, rebounded, and scattered debris, some of which spilled through Frank's window along with the dormered lid.

Frank shouted, Howell woke up again, and Paisley recovered the main body of the trash container for another assault. This time, though, she carried it, dripping vile liquids and moist pasteboard, to the front of Frank's car, where she wielded it after the fashion of a battering ram, repeatedly slamming one corner into the nearest headlamp. It took three whacks to shatter the glass, by which time Frank had managed to jettison the trash-can lid. Now he tried to halt her vandalism by running her down. Paisley skipped aside, one-handedly bashing the container into his car again and knocking his rearview mirror off its mount.

A siren began to keen, and they all looked around to see Deputy Marshal Blake Seals come barreling into the intersection in one of Ignacio's two patrol cars.

iv.

Seals introduced her into the middle cell of five in the block at the rear of the marshal's office, and she was relieved to find that none of the others held prisoners. The drunk tank at the end of the damp hall looked exactly like a cave or the entrance to a mine shaft—a concrete grotto. For a time, Seals stood outside her cell, his pock-marked face like a big albino strawberry and his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his windbreaker so that it bellied out in front like a sail. He wasn't a cruel Anglo, just a pompous and partisan one.

"Sorry there's nobody in tonight for you to talk to."

"Couldn't you find any other Indians to arrest?"

"You were making a public disturbance, Miss Coldpony."

"I was the *victim* of a public disturbance. Those turkeys were drunk. Frank tried to run over me."

"The kid was just trying to depart the scene before you turned his Trans Am into scrap metal."

It was a temptation to renew their street argument, but they'd hashed out the details three dozen times already, in the middle of Ignacio, and Seals had sent the "kids"—friends of his—home to bed, promising Frank that the "perpetrator" would spend the rest of this chilly night "incarcerated."

Well, here she was, *incarcerated.* She would have cursed Seals for the fact that the jail stank of disinfectant if not for the linked fact that it would've reeked of something far less bearable if he hadn't earlier both-

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ered to "sanitize" everything. That was one of the questionable bonuses of being deputy in Ignacio—you also got to be custodian.

"Sorry there's only that—" gesturing at the urinal—"if your bladder gets heavy. We don't have many female guests."

"Leave me alone, Deputy."

"I could bring you a bucket."

"Stick your head in it."

He grinned, mysteriously delighted by her retort. "Put my foot in that one, didn't I?" He returned to the office.

Paisley sat down on her grungy mattress, which lay askew on what looked like a pig-iron frame. She wouldn't be in for long, though. Her phone call had gone to DeWayne Sky, who, although not overjoyed to be roused at four in the morning, had told her to hang on, he would vouch for her, put up her bail, or whatever. She was welcome to stay the rest of the night with LannaSue and him.

In the drunk tank down the hall, somebody or something coughed, a painfully congested hacking.

"Deputy," Paisley called, "I'm not alone back here."

"That's only Barnes," Seals shouted from the office. "I forgot about him."

Barnes. Herbert Barnes. Whirling Goat. Seals had shoved him into the cave and forgotten about him. The old man careened out of its bleak dampness, slumped against the bars with his arms hanging through. He was wall-eyed with cheap liquor or bread-filtered hair tonic, and his white hair tufted out from his temples in a way that made him resemble a great horned owl. Usually, reservation police took care of him, but tonight—last night—he had fallen to the efficient ministrations of Blake Seals.

"Hello, Alma." He sounded more weary than drunk. Maybe a nap had rubbed the nap off the velvet of his nightly stupor.

"Paisley," Paisley said. "My name is Paisley."

"Your mother called you Alma," the drunk lessoned her. " 'Soul' in Spanish."

"I know what it means. But my father named me Paisley, Paisley Coldpony, and that's the name on my birth certificate."

"You lived with your mother longer than your daddy. Your name is Alma Arriola." He pulled some string out of the pocket of his dirty suede coat and, with his hands outside the bars, began making cat's cradles with it. He was remarkably dexterous for so old and alcohol-steeped a brave. Paisley found her irritation with his comments about her name softened a little by the web-weaving of his stubby fingers.

"Jack rabbit," he said, rotating the string figure so that she could see

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this two-dimensional creature loping across the blackness of the drunk tank.

"Arriola's a Spanish name, too," he added pedantically, hacking her off again. Then he dismantled the airy jack rabbit and began a second latticework figure.

"And Barnes is an Anglo name, Whirling Goat."

Paisley knew that some of her hostility to the old guy was left over from her dream. She resented what he'd said to her in it and was sorry to find him—dare she even think the word?—*polluting* the cell block. (If, given the disinfectant fumes stinging her eyes, further pollution were even possible.)

"And this is a goat," he said, holding up the second figure and whirling it for her benefit. "When I was eight, I rode a goat for three minutes that none of my friends could even catch. My name—it comes from that."

"Which one of your friends had the stopwatch, Herbert?"

But neither this sarcasm nor her rude familiarity would provoke him. He ceased to whirl, and handily collapsed, the goat, only to follow it with several successive string compositions, all of which he was magically weaving for his own amusement. His equanimity put her off. She wanted to puncture it.

"I'm going to dance in the Sun Dance. I've been dream-called."

"What do you think of this one?" he said, holding up a figure that initially made no sense to her. Standing at the bars of her cell, she peered at the crisscrossing strings with real annoyance. Her world-shaking declaration of intent had slipped past him like a coyote squeezing untouched through a hole in a henhouse.

"What is it?" she grudgingly asked.

He coughed, but his preoccupied hands were unable to cover his mouth. "Kar'tajan," he managed.

"What?" The word summoned no resonances for her.

"Kar'tajan," he repeated. "But only the head, Alma—only the head and the horn."

Now Paisley recognized it. It was the head—the head and the horn—of a unicorn. She could not imagine how he had produced it with a single piece of looped string, but he had, and the awkward way that he held his hands to sustain the figure was justified by its fragile elegance. She'd never known that Barnes, *aka* Whirling Goat, had such a talent—or *any* talent, for that matter, beyond making a year-round nuisance of himself and sourly kibitzing every performer at every important Ute ceremony. But, so soon after the seventh repetition of her dream, the sight of the string figure—*this* string figure—gave her a decided pang. For it, too, seemed part and parcel of her summons.

"Why do you call it a kar'tajan?"

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"Because that's its name. That's the name our Holy He-She gave it—before history turned the world inside-out."

"It's a unicorn, Whirling Goat. There's no such animal."

"It's a kar'tajan, Alma. I've seen one."

From the office, Seals shouted, "He saw it drinking over by the Pine with this humongous herd of pink elephants!"

The deputy's words, and then his guffaws, dismantled the mood of balanced wonder and unease that Paisley had been experiencing—in much the way that Barnes's hands collapsed the string figure of the kar'tajan or unicorn. He stuffed the looped string back into his coat pocket and slumped more heavily against the bars.

"Can't you do a buffalo?" Paisley felt strangely tender toward him. She hoped that he wouldn't relapse into the stupor that had probably occasioned his arrest.

"Ain't nothing I can't do with string."

"Do me a buffalo, then."

Barnes coughed, more or less negatively.

Damn you, Blake Seals, Paisley thought. And then, as unbidden as lightning from a high, azure sky, a memory bolt illuminating the headless corpse of her mother struck her. She was seeing again the clay-colored feet on the lounger's footrest, the dropped .12-gauge, and the Jackson Pollock brain painting on the walls behind the old chair. She'd just come home from a debate with the kids at Cortez, a debate that her team had won, and there was Mama D'lo, waiting to share the victory with her, messily at ease in the lounger, forever free of motherly obligation. Although maybe not.

"I've been dream-called," Paisley said. Defiantly, she looked at Barnes. "To dance in the Sun Dance."

"Good. Good for you." He hacked into his forearm.

Paisley stared at him. "Didn't you hear me? I've been granted a vision. I'm to dance with the men."

"It's what your mama wants." Barnes shifted against the bars. "She told me. That being so, you should do it."

"Told you? Why would she tell *you*, old man? When?"

"Tonight. A little time past." He indicated the impenetrable blackness behind him. "Pretty funny talk we had."

Seals lumbered into the upper end of the cell block. "Every talk you have while you're swackered is funny, Barnes. Chats with old Chief Ignacio. Arguments with John Wayne. Even a midnight powwow with Jesus."

"Get your butt out of here, Deputy," Paisley said. "Who asked you to horn in?"

Smirking, Seals raised his big hands as if to ward off physical blows.

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"Simmer down. I'm going. Just forgot for a minute we was running a hotel here." He backed out, closing the cell-block door behind him.

"You saw her tonight, Mr. Barnes? *Tonight*?"

"Yes. In here. I was on that pissy mattress—" pointing his chin toward it, a shadow in the dark—"and D'lo showed up, maybe from the San Juan Mountains. She stood over me, signing."

"Signing?"

"You know, hand talk."

"But why? To keep Seals from hearing?"

"That didn't matter. He was patrolling." Barnes hunched his shoulders. "Alma, that was her only way to talk. You see?"

Paisley understood. She had seen her mother's *ini'putc'* in the Cuthairs' stationwagon on the day of her funeral, and the revenant, like the corpse, had had no head. But then the ghost had vanished, leaving Paisley to doubt what she had witnessed.

"What did she say? What did her hand talk mean?"

"Just what you say, Alma. That you must dance this year. That she desires it. That no one should hinder you, girl or no girl."

"It's 'no girl,' Mr. Barnes. It's 'woman.' " She told him as a matter of information, not to scold—for she was ready to forgive the old fart for his bad behavior in her dream.

A moment later, Paisley said, "But why did she visit *you*? Why did she come here to give you that message?"

"I have a reputation," Whirling Goat said proudly.

As a sot, Paisley silently chastised him, but she knew that he meant as an expert on certain ceremonial matters and so refrained from disillusioning him. Let Barnes claim for himself the dubious glory of an *ini'putc'* visitation.

"Also," he said, "Dolores must have foreknown."

"Foreknown what?"

"That you'd be arrested tonight. That it would be good for me to give you my blessing."

"I have your blessing?"

"Of course. I gave it to you already. How many children do I show my string creatures?" He hacked again, magpie croaks.

"Not many," Paisley hazarded.

"Damned straight. Now, though, you're among them."

Talk lapsed. Paisley wondered if her run-in with Frank Winston and Howell Payne had been providential. Yes, it probably had. But she had no time to mull the matter further, for Blake Seals entered the cell block again, this time leading a haggard-appearing DeWayne Sky and announcing loudly that she was "free to go." Her esteemed tribal councilman was vouching for her character.

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"What about Mr. Barnes?" Paisley said.

"What about him?" Seals echoed her.

"He's slept it off. He isn't drunk any longer. You should let him out, too."

"It's an hour or two till dawn," Seals protested. "He can get a snootful in five minutes, a sloshing bellyful in ten."

"Let Mr. Barnes out, too," DeWayne Sky said. He was wearing khaki trousers with a turquoise belt buckle so large that it made Paisley think of a chunk of the Colorado firmanent for which the councilman's family seemed to've been named.

Not liking it much, Seals released the old drunk along with the unrepentant Trans Am basher. In the jail's front office, he called them over to a metal desk to reclaim their belongings. All Paisley had was her school books, but Barnes had a small clutch of items—his wallet, his house key, a few salted peanuts, and some sort of foil-wrapped coin that Sky picked up and turned in the glare of the light bulb as if it were an extraordinary find.

"What the hell are you doing with this, Barnes?"

"He's a Boy Scout," Seals said. "His motto is 'Be Prepared.' "

Sky threw the coin back down on the desk. "Hell, man, you're eighty-something. And nine tenths of the time you're so stinking drunk, your carrot'd have to have chronic droop, anyway."

A rubber? Paisley speculated. Is Barnes, our oldest bachelor, actually carrying a rubber around with him?

"There's the other one tenth," the old man said, neither shamed nor amused by Sky's attack. He stuffed the battered coin into his pocket along with his other pocket fillers and moved to the door as vigorously as he paraded around the camp grounds at the Bear Dance in May and the Sun Dance in July. Those were two weeks out of the year—maybe the only two—that he scrupulously laid off wine, whiskey, beer, hair tonic, everything but the old bucks charged with organizing and running the dances. Paisley was proud of him for getting through the door upright, his dignity intact and that silly antique rubber in his pocket.

"What do you want to do?" DeWayne Sky asked her. "Stand here till Marshal Breault comes on duty?"

She didn't, and so they left.

v.

The Skys lived in a wood-frame house that, several years ago, they had remodeled in an unusual way. Around it, entirely around it, Sky had had built a conical frame whose summit rose better than forty feet above

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the original roof. Sky's workmen had stuccoed the frame, windowing it at various places with huge rectangular sheets of Plexiglas to let in the sun. At night, spotlights lit the cone so that you could see it from several blocks away, a garish white tepee rising among the scattered tract houses like an advertisement for a Wild West amusement park.

The cone's huge stucco flap opened to the east, as prescribed for tepees by sacred tradition, but the door to the house inside the frame faced south. Thus, Paisley and her rescuer—once he'd parked his Ford Bronco in the driveway—had to walk an enclosed track between the house and the inside tepee wall to reach the *real* entrance to his living quarters.

Paisley felt decidedly weird following DeWayne Sky around this bizarre corridor, but she remembered that he had erected the fake tepee not just to pretend that he was still living in one, as most whites mockingly accused, but to avail himself of the power to call spirits that round houses—and only round houses—could impart to those living in them. A house with corners, a house with none of the circularity of earth and sky about it, preached DeWayne Sky, cut one off from the spirits and thus robbed one of power.

Although Paisley feared that merely masking a boxy house with a big stucco tepee was not the best way of persuading the gods that you were back in touch with both the earth and the Old Ones, she knew that in the years since erecting his cone, DeWayne Sky's power and influence among the Southern Utes had grown enormously. He'd spent a lot of money on his "folly," but he'd got all of that back, and a great deal more, representing his people at Indian caucuses around the country, presiding as the grand marshal in Frontier Day parades in various towns, and taking part in all five Shoshone-Ute Sun Dances, just like a true shaman. Now, he was chairman of the tribal council and chief of the Sun Dance committee, and who'd have the sand to tell him that his big stucco tepee hadn't gotten him in good with the Great Manitou?

Not me, Paisley thought. Not on a dare.

LannaSue Sky handed her a cup of hot tea, sweetened with honey, and pointed her to a couch covered with a scratchy Navajo blanket. On the knee of her jeans, the tea cup warmed a circle that Paisley couldn't help regarding as a tiny replica of the base of the tepee surrounding them.

When LannaSue returned to bed, Sky paced in front of Paisley in his boots, a stocky man with two tight braids hanging to his waist and a paunch decorated by that sky-blue belt buckle.

"What's the word, Alma? What's going on?

"The word's Paisley," she corrected him.

He waved off the correction with angry impatience. "Tell me stuff I don't know. Tell me important stuff."

"Names are important. Names let us—"

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"Okay. If I call you Paisley, you call me Papa Tuqú-payá, got it?" *Tuqú-payá* was the Ute word for sky, one of only a few dozen in her people's tongue that Paisley knew. "Understand?"

"Sure, Papa Tuqú-payá."

"Talk to me, Paisley. But only important stuff."

So she related her Sun Dance dream. Parts, however, she kept to herself, the parts that still frightened or unnerved her.

A lamp in the tiny living room relieved a little of the predawn gloom, but when she looked out its picture window, she saw only the interior wall of the fake tepee. A melancholy claustrophobia rose in her. Nevertheless, she kept talking, and when she was finished, she repeated that tonight's dream had been her seventh in the past five weeks. Therefore her visit to town.

"Women don't dance," Sky declared.

"Women *have* danced, Papa Tuqú-payá. At Fort Hall, they do it all the time. They've done it here, too."

"Twelve years ago, child. Two months later, one of them who'd danced, Theresa Eagle, took sick. The white doctors had no idea with what, but she saw the sacred water bird in the tube connected to her IV bottle and soon thereafter died."

"Mama told me that four other women danced. Nothing like that happened to them."

"No. It happened to other people. Our last Sun Dance chief, the one who let the women dance—his wife died of a heart attack that year. The aunt of the tribal council's last chairman—she died, too. I could make a list."

"None of that matters, Papa Sky. I'm being dream-called. If I'm not, why am I having this dream again and again?"

LannaSue Sky trundled back into the living room in her robe and sat down by Paisley. "Of course you're being called." She looked at her husband. "Who can sleep with this darling here?"

Sky tossed his braids over his shoulders—apparently, in this context, a gesture of disgust.

"Are you afraid to let Paisley dance? Afraid that, two months later, *your* beloved wife might die?" LannaSue briefly smothered a laugh, then gave up and released it. "Beloved wife, my ass. What he's afraid might die is his beloved *workhorse*."

"LannaSue—"

"Okay. I'll shut my silly mouth." She patted Paisley's knee, the one without the tea cup. "For a while, anyhow."

The Sun Dance chief started pacing again, trying to recoup some of his pilfered authority. "If I let you dance, your dream says we must all paint ourselves like *ini'putc'*—ghosts."

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"I don't know. Is that what it means?"

"I hope not. If we did that, Paisley, it would be like saying the Muache—we Southern Utes—are dead. Dead people can't ask the Creator to give them power."

"They can ask to be resurrected," LannaSue said.

Sky ignored this. "Forget that, for now. Why are there Anglos in your dream—the floppy-hatted woman, the sick man?"

Paisley shrugged. Even now, she could see them clearly—but she was fairly sure she had never met them in life.

"You haven't told me everything," Sky said. "Your dream scared you. It scared you so bad you're afraid to tell it all."

His keenness in this startled Paisley. Some of the Muache said that DeWayne Sky was a fraud—but he had never knowingly violated any ceremonial tradition, and his knowledge of her reaction to her own dream seemed to her a good sign.

"Tell me," he commanded her. "Tell me even what you're afraid to tell."

"Otherwise," LannaSue said, taking the empty tea cup from her, "he won't be able to accept you into the dance."

Grimacing, Sky made a curt be-quiet gesture.

"I don't even know that I *want* to dance," Paisley admitted, her mind confusingly aboil again.

"Not your decision," Sky said. "My decision. Tell me so I can decide. If you *don't* tell me, the decision's out of my hands, and it's simple: 'No way, gal. No way.' "

Great, Paisley thought. That would keep me from dancing. And if I don't have to dance, I can leave that much sooner to look for my father. But then it struck her that if she didn't fully divulge the contents of her dream, the dream would continue to recur, and to vary with each recurrence, until it had driven her as crazy as Moonshine Coyote, a woman whose husband and three sons were all in prison and who often sat in a wheelbarrow near Highway 172 drinking cherry Kool-Aid and spitting mouthfuls at passing motorists.

"Come on," Sky said. "You're wasting my time."

"Yeah, you could be sawing logs," LannaSue tweaked him.

"There's three or four things," Paisley said. "The first is those pictures the woman took." Both Skys waited expectantly for her to go on. So she told them that when her dream self had looked at the developed prints handed her by Larry Cuthair, she found that they showed only the interior of the Thirst House—no dancers, no singers, no drummers, no spectators at all. The people taking part in the event as pseudo-ghosts had become real ghosts when processed by Anglo picture-taking technology.

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Which was just another variation, Paisley now realized, on that old cultural-anthropological chestnut about the camera's ability to steal a shy African bushman's, or an innocent Amazonian cannibal's, soul. From what Paisley knew of anthropologists, though, it seemed more likely that it was the people on the *taking*—not the *being taken*—end of the camera who forfeited their souls.

"That frightened you even in your dream," Sky said. "You tore the pictures up. You scattered the pieces."

"Yes."

"What else?"

She told him about the trouble she'd had focusing on the totem on the sacred cottonwood. The brightness of the sun, and the angle at which it shone down, had been the main culprits, but it was also likely that she hadn't *wanted* to see what was in the tree's crotch, knowing that it wasn't Buffalo but . . . something else.

"What?" Sky asked. "What was it?"

LannaSue gripped Paisley's knee, reassuringly squeezed it.

At last, Paisley told them, "My mother's face."

Having confessed this, she could *see* her mother's face again—not blown to smithereens as on the night of the suicide, but as it had been before that. Beaten-looking and imploring. Except that, in the dream, her face had been as large as a bison's head.

"Mama D'lo wants her to dance," LannaSue said. "D'lo's spirit is restless."

"Don't jump to conclusions, woman!"

"She has no son to dance her to rest, DeWayne. If it's to be done, Alma—Paisley here—will have to do it."

Well, that was exactly what Whirling Goat had told her in the jail. It made sense. Mama D'lo's *ini'putc'* had visited Barnes in the drunk tank to ask him to assure her that she was doing exactly right in going to Sky with her seventh dream.

Sky, however, stomped out of the living room into another part of the house. Paisley was perplexed. Maybe LannaSue had so badly provoked him that he was washing his hands of both of them. Women weren't supposed to organize or dance in the Sun Dance, although they could support the men by singing or by bringing willow bundles to them during rest periods—and yet here were two women, his own wife and a teen-age girl, one telling him how to interpret a dream and the other presenting herself to him as a would-be dancer. No wonder the poor old buck was pissed.

But a minute later, Sky was back, holding a red-cedar flute, an instrument that—he said gruffly, sitting down on an ottoman in the middle

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of the room—he had made himself. Its song would help Paisley make sense of the two shredded photographs.

"How?"

"Shut your eyes. Hear my song. When it stops and I say you're doing something, do it. —LannaSue, turn out that lamp."

LannaSue obeyed, and the room, an hour before dawn, was so dark that Paisley felt better closing her eyes than sitting in it trying to find enough light to see by. Sky began to play. The melody was thin, broken, and not terribly pretty. But it altogether took her, snaking in and out of her mind as if seeking a hole to go into and hide. In fact, when the melody stopped, Paisley half believed that it had found this hole.

"A woman dancer in the Thirst House," Sky intoned, "bends down and picks up the pieces of two torn photographs."

That's me, Paisley thought. That's me he's talking about, me he's telling what to do. And in the darkness of her skull, inside the darkness of a boxy house inside the darkness of a stucco tepee, she saw herself clad all in white, powdered like a ghost, kneeling in the dust to gather up the scraps of treated pasteboard. As she did, Sky began to play again—the same harsh and monotonous, but compelling, tune. He kept playing until the white-clad avatar of Paisley Coldpony kneeling in the Sun Dance lodge of her own mind had picked up every single fragment of paper.

Said Sky then, "The women carries these pieces to the drum and spreads them out on top of it."

The red-cedar flute crooned again, and Paisley performed in her head what Sky had just attributed to the neurological automaton—the day-dream simulation—he called "the woman." To Paisley, it felt a lot like moving a computer figure through a two-dimensional labyrinth on one of the Apple monitors that they had at school now; the sense of being two places at once was just that strong, as was her awareness that she could back out—albeit with a pang of real loss—at nearly any moment she wanted.

"The woman fits the pieces together—into two pictures. She takes all the time she needs."

Paisley took all the time she needed.

The flute ceased to croon.

Said Sky, "The woman speaks aloud. She tells everyone at the Sun Dance what the pictures show."

The obedient self-projection in Paisley's mind stared down at the puzzle-fit photos on the drumhead. In reassembling them, she had paid their images little heed, but now she was shocked to find that one was a picture of Samuel Taylor Coldpony—her father—standing next to the leather-

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hatted woman who had supposedly *taken* the picture. They stood side by side in the corral.

The other photo, meanwhile, was of an emaciated unicorn—or kar'tajan, as Barnes would call it—rearing at the Tree of Life in the Sun Dance lodge, its front hooves flashing like knives at the totem affixed to it.

Startled, Paisley opened her eyes on the dark.

"She *tells* them," reiterated Sky, "what the pictures show."

Reluctantly, staring at nothing, Paisley told the Skys what her dream self had just seen.

Laying the flute aside, her mentor said, "To find your father, Paisley, you must only find that woman."

"What of the sick unicorn?" she blurted. That Barnes had shown her a string-figure unicorn in the jail seemed not so much a happy, as a monstrous, coincidence.

"The unicorn and the sick Anglo in your dream," Sky said, "are different sides of the same coin."

Like the "coin" that Barnes always carries? she wondered. But there was no way to ask Sky such a strange question, and she didn't yet know how a young man with AIDS and a kar'tajan with protruding ribs could mirror anything in each other but illness.

No matter. Sky had an explanation: "The parents of the sick young man have turned him away, just as you think your folks have done, Sam by never coming to see you and Mama D'lo by . . ."

LannaSue said, "She knows, DeWayne."

"That's why you saw D'lo's face on the Tree of Life. And why his unicorn is trying to cut up the totem with its hooves."

Suddenly, Paisley could stand no more. "You sound like one of those goddamn BIA psychologists! Like Chief Sigmund Sky of the Muache Shrinks' Association!"

She reached across LannaSue and turned on the lamp. The sudden light made everyone in the room—eyes narrowed, mouths pursed—look constipated.

The Sun Dance chief picked up his red-cedar flute, rose from the ottoman, and stomped off toward his tiny study. At the door, he turned and gave Paisley a bitter look.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," he said. "LannaSue, find her something to eat."

vi.

She ate scrambled eggs, to which LannaSue had added diced green

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pepper and jalapeño cheese. Her hunger surprised her. Ten minutes ago, eating had been the least of her concerns.

LannaSue was nursing a cigarette and a cup of coffee. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The question surprised her even more than did the extent of her hunger. "I *am* grown up, LannaSue."

"Okay. What do you want to do?"

"Finish school. Dance in the Sun Dance. Find my father." She couldn't think what else to add.

"You want to be a *po'rat*," LannaSue told her.

LannaSue Sky's absolute certainty on this score was yet another surprise, and Paisley halted her fork in mid-ascent. "How do you know that? Hell, *I* don't know that."

The Southern Utes had passed a quarter of a century without a bona fide *po'rat*, or shaman. They had had leaders aplenty, chiefs and organizers and tribal councilmen, but persons with *powa'a*—supernatural authority from the One-Above—well, the Muache had had to import such persons from the Navajos, the Jicarilla Apaches, or even the Shoshones, whose Sun Dance procedures were so lax that they let dancers suck wet towels in the Thirst House and had no ban on photography so long as the picture-takers were Indian.

Not even DeWayne Sky, tepee or no tepee, qualified as a *po'rat*, although he had striven mightily to help maintain the integrity of the Bear Dance and the Sun Dance. On the other hand, not being a bona fide shaman, he hadn't tried to resurrect the *mawo' gwipani*, or the Round Dance, at which everyone danced to hold white diseases—small pox, clap, polio—in check. Nor the old wedding rite in which a couple sat together in a smoke-filled tepee to prove their compatibility and faithfulness. Nor the ritual of laying a baby's birth cord on an anthill to bless the child with strength and good fortune. Sky's curing powers were beyond the average, but far from impressive in the old way.

For dynamic medicine, a true *po'rat*—a genuine shaman—was required, and Paisley's people not only had no one qualified, they had no candidates. Why LannaSue would suppose that *she* might make a candidate, much less a full-fledged medicine woman, Paisley was unable to guess. No matter how often she claimed to be grown, she knew in her heart that she was still a school girl, whose daddy had never visited her in all the years since his leavetaking and whose Mama D'lo had . . . done what she'd done. And here she was putting away scrambled eggs as if she hadn't eaten at school yesterday and gulping them down like a starved dog.

How can *I* be a *po'rat*? Paisley wondered. How can this kindly lady see me even as a *would-be* medicine woman?

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"DeWayne!" LannaSue called, holding a smoked-down cigarette in front of her. "DeWayne, stop sulking and come here!"

A moment later, Sky propped himself against the doorjamb. "You should've married a poodle, not a man."

"DeWayne, Paisley's dream—it's calling her to be a *po'rat*, a medicine woman, a healer, not only a dancer."

"You've got piñon nuts for brains, LannaSue. If you open your mouth again, they'll rattle onto the floor."

"The sick man in her dream," said LannaSue, undeterred by this warning. Speculatively, she added, "The kar'tajan in the photo she pieced back together to your flute's song."

"What about them?" Sky said.

Paisley was confused again. LannaSue had just said *kar'tajan*, the very word that Barnes had used earlier this morning. Moreover, Sky—despite his put-on disgruntlement—was clearly heeding his wife's words, trying to follow her reasoning.

"The Sun Dance is for earning power to heal with, and the Anglo with the deadly illness in her dream requires healing. So does the kar'tajan in her dream photo—it's angry and sick, too."

Sky was noncommittal. "So?"

"Paisley calls for the man's healing. She wants to help him. But you say he's broken the rules, and you throw him out."

"He *has* broken the rules," Sky retorted, astonishing Paisley by talking about her dream as if it were an event of which he and his wife shared a real memory. "He brought in moisture."

"Only a name on a shirt."

"He brought in moisture, he brought in Anglo advertising, and he brought them with that picture-taking woman."

I only *dreamed* those things, Paisley thought, looking back and forth between the arguing husband and wife. And it was *my* dream. How can they argue about *my* dream?

But another part of her mind declared, Paisley, you dreamed it *seven times*. It's got to be seriously considered, and DeWayne and LannaSue are doing that.

"Fetch the god sheet, DeWayne."

"Christ, woman, that's only to come out at the end of the Sun Dance. Next, you'll be asking me to piss on the sacred fire."

"After asking for the healing of the man you threw out, Paisley had a vision. I think it means she's to become a *po'rat*. Fetch the god sheet. We'll see."

It looked for a minute that Sky might stomp off again, outraged and truculent. Paisley would not've blamed him. The god sheet, if that somewhat awkward term signified what she thought it did, was a piece of

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linen that the Sun Dance chief brought forth during the closing ceremonies to impress the Shoshones, Arapahos, Apaches, and Navajos who had come to take part, for only the Muache had anything so impressive to display at dance's end. That LannaSue was asking Sky to get it now, months ahead of time, for no other purpose but to determine her suitability for shamanhood—well, it staggered Paisley. She finished eating, drank the last of her coffee, stared embarrassedly at her hands.

"He's getting it," LannaSue said. "Come on."

They found Sky peeking around his study door into the living room, holding something—the god sheet, Paisley figured—behind it out of sight. "Not a word of this to anyone," he said. "Not a word of this from either of you pathetically shy females to anybody outside this house. Got me?"

"Come on. Bring it out. I'll throw the rug back. You can lay it down right here." LannaSue tapped the floor with her foot.

"Blindfold her," Sky said.

"What? There's nobody here but us, DeWayne."

"Do it. In this, I'll have my way. She has to be blindfolded for the test to work. And turn that damn lamp out again."

Blindfolded? The lamp out? Was she going to get to see the god sheet or not? All the hocus-pocus—which she couldn't relate to the time-honored rituals of either the Bear or the Sun Dance—frightened Paisley. Hell, LannaSue's notion that she had *po'rat* potential frightened her. Before she could say anything, though, LannaSue had tied a clean dish towel around her eyes and further insured her sightlessness by pressing a pair of Sky's sunglasses into place over the towel. Blind man's bluff.

She could still feel, however, and when Sky billowed the sheet out and let it drift down like a provisional carpet, she felt the stirred air slap her like something wet. Moisture, when you were dry, was power, but she wasn't dry, and this whole business—now that she had told her dream and eaten—seemed peculiar. Still, she trusted the Skys, and if they thought this was the way to test her, well, it must be okay.

LannaSue sat her down, helped her remove her shoes and socks. Then she was standing behind Paisley, her large hands gripping her shoulders. Sky retreated and returned. When his red-cedar flute began to play again (the same painful melody), LannaSue pushed her gently forward, telling her to step lightly on the god sheet.

"Try to make a crossing," she said.

A crossing? Paisley thought. I can make a crossing with my eyes closed—which was a joke almost good enough to laugh aloud at. But when LannaSue released her, all her fragile bravado fell apart and she hesitated.

Legend had it that the god sheet—the sacred linen—was an authentic

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Muache relic. At some point over the past half century, a Ute visionary who had just successfully completed the Sun Dance went walking in the hills near the dance grounds and happened upon the footprints of a stranger. This Indian was wrapped in the sheet that he'd worn into and out of the Thirst House over the three days of the dance, and it occurred to him that these footprints—they were narrow and bare—were Jesus's. The Mormons claimed that the Indians were a lost tribe of Israel, after all, and that, once upon a time, Jesus had appeared in the New World. In any case, the Ute visionary laid his cloaklike sheet atop the strange footprints, and the sheet, according to legend, absorbed them into its fabric so thoroughly that no amount of scrubbing or detergent could lift them out again.

Now, the Sun Dance chief was the keeper of this holy relic, and Paisley stood at its edge, unable to see it, knowing that she must cross it to inherit to . . . well, an apprenticeship that might one day confer upon her divine power.

"Walk, darling," LannaSue Sky encouraged her. "Walk."

Paisley took a step. Sky's flute continued its balky crooning, and the young woman heard the music in the same way that she felt the god sheet—as a spiritual warmth. In fact, although the pine floor was cold and the sheet itself frigid, as she navigated the musty-smelling relic, Paisley noticed that the soles of her feet—step by careful step—seemed to absorb more and more warmth, more and more tingly energy, and it was tempting just to *dash* from one side of the linen to the other.

"The woman in the Thirst House goes slow," Sky said. "She goes slow and watches what there is to watch."

The flute resumed playing. Paisley overcame the urge to dash. Soon, she found herself observing again her own ghostly automaton in the Sun Dance corral of her mind.

There before her self-projection's eyes, hanging from the holy cottonwood like Jesus on his Roman cross, was the skinny Anglo in the Coca-Cola shirt. He had been crucified on the center pole, his arms stretched out into unsupportive air and his feet nailed to the Tree of Life with splinters of antelope bone. The gaunt Anglo was saying something, mumbling aloud, but all that Paisley's dream self could make out was the end of his mumble—" . . . forsaken me"—a phrase with the rising intonation of a question.

Whereupon the Anglo faded from her dream self's sight, vanished into the white air of the imaginary Sun Dance lodge, to be replaced on the center pole by another totem altogether—the head not of a buffalo or of her own dead mother, but of a taxidermically prepared specimen of a mythological beast that Paisley knew as a unicorn but Whirling Goat and the Skys as a kar'tajan, as if they all had some ancient knowledge

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to which she was not yet privy and on which she might never gain a steady grip. All the other dancers rushed this totem. Leaping, then falling entranced, all had visions, while Paisley's dream self watched from her own Sun Dance path, buoyed by the activity but confused by it, too.

Then she saw that the gaunt Anglo, clad now only in an Indian breechclout, stood beyond the Thirst House entrance. He looked at her peculiarly for a moment, then motioned her to forsake the lodge and follow him. Paisley could feel the soles of her feet—her real feet—growing warmer and warmer as she struggled to obey the mysterious Anglo's summons. It was pity that drew her, not quite conviction, and she knew that once she had seen what he required of her, she would return to the Thirst House to apprise herself of the contents of all her fellow dancers' visions.

Suddenly, the pine floor was cold under her feet again.

"You're across!" a woman's voice cried.

Paisley hoped that LannaSue would remove her sunglasses, untie her blindfold, and give her a look at the god sheet, but Sky, she could tell, was gathering up the sheet, hurriedly folding it, and returning it to its hiding place in his study. Only when he had come back from this task did LannaSue turn on the lamp, remove the blindfold, and hug her. Both she and Sky were beaming at her—as if she had just climbed Mount Everest or swum the English Channel. Paisley blinked at them, more confused than ever, her mind a jumble of images—some distilled from dreams and some from all that had happened to her since coming to town.

"I'm taking you as a Sun Dancer," Sky told her.

LannaSue said, "And for training as the new Muache *po'rat*."

Toying with one of his braids, Sky nodded.

"But why?" Paisley asked them. "What did I do?"

"You walked where the Walking Man walked," LannaSue said. "On the sheet where *his* footprints lie, you put *your* feet."

Paisley looked at her mentor and her mentor's wife. She felt gratitude for their approval of her and of what she had reputedly accomplished, but also skepticism. All she had for evidence that she had done anything very significant was that odd warmth—which still just perceptibly lingered—on the soles of her bare feet. And, of course, the Skys' word that she had walked exactly atop the Walking Man's, or Jesus', footprints. It seemed simultaneously a remarkable achievement and a con.

"Great responsibility comes with this honor," Sky said.

Paisley knew. Already, the responsibility had begun to weigh on her. Taking part in the Sun Dance would keep her from leaving to find her father until July, and her apprenticeship as a shaman would require not only her early return but a long sojourn on the Navajo reservation in

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New Mexico so that a true Navajo shaman could adopt and train her. Life seemed even more complicated than it had after Mama D'lo's suicide.

"It's wonderful," LannaSue said, chucking her under the chin as if she were a baby. "You'll bring us hope again—hope and pride and power."

Paisley slumped to the sofa. She looked through the picture window. The inside of the fake tepee was pinkly agleam, dawnlight filtering through the hard plastic windows set high in its stucco cone. Was it possible that her dreams had led her to such a pass? Her private, impalpable dreams?

LannaSue hunkered in front of her, gripping her knees with her vise-like hands. For a moment, she simply hunkered there—Paisley thought that squatting so must be hard for her, she was by no means a petite woman—but abruptly said,

"Some folks think that dreams aren't real, darling. Some folks think they're nothing but nonsense."

Sky grunted a derisive assent. The derision in it was for the people his wife was talking about, not for his wife. They were in harmony again. Paisley's walk had restored them to it.

"But dreams are of God, and dreams cause real things to happen, and you, a dreamer, are greatly blessed, darling."

"I—" Paisley began.

"Greatly," LannaSue said. She struggled out of her squat and looked at her husband. "When it's time," she said authoritatively, "DeWayne will drive you to school."

vi.

After school, Paisley mooched a ride from Larry Cuthair on his motorcycle. They didn't go home immediately, though, because Larry wanted to buy some notebook paper in Ignacio.

They rode into town together, Larry entered the drugstore, and Paisley sat at the curb on his bike waiting for him to come back. While she was waiting, she looked halfway down the block and caught sight of a man staggering out of the laundromat. It was Herbert Barnes, who'd probably spent most of the day in the washateria with a bottle of cheap booze. He careened along, as if about to fall from the sidewalk into the street. Paisley ran to him and grabbed him by the elbow.

"Whirling Goat, are you okay?"

He cocked a bloodshot eye at her. " 'Course I am," he croaked, patting the pocket of his coat. "Got me some spirits right here—some dandy Old Crow for a randy old Ute."

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"Chief Sky says I'm accepted for the Sun Dance," she said. "He and LannaSue believe I've been dream-called."

"You're pretty?" he said doubtfully.

"Thank you," Paisley said, equally doubtfully.

"You're very pretty?"

"I don't know."

Barnes shifted his weight from one wobbly leg to the other. A look of obscene slyness came into the one eye that he was managing to keep open. "Your mama D'lo told me you oughta take me home with you," he said. "You know, to watch over you."

"Yeah. In hand talk."

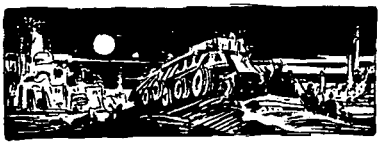
"I . . . s-swuh-swear," Barnes half hissed, half coughed.

Up the street, Larry shouted, "Paisley, come on!"

Paisley slipped the five-dollar bill that LannaSue had forced on her that morning into the old fart's coat. He'd only spend it on drink, but there was no way she could reform him in the next ten minutes nor was she about to take him home with her. The money was guilt money, but it was also . . . well, a token of esteem for what he had once been. He believed that he had seen a kar'tajan, and he carried in his pocket a foil-wrapped lucky coin—a talisman, both absurd and poignant, of hope.

"Paisley!" Larry Cuthair yelled again.

She kissed the smelly old sot on the cheek and ran back up the sidewalk to climb aboard Larry's motorcycle. ●



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TWENTY-TWO STEPS TO THE APOCALYPSE

by Terence M. Green and Andrew Weiner

"Twenty-two Steps to the Apocalypse" is each author's first attempt at a collaboration. They tell us they "are pleased at the symbiotic vision that resulted," and are likely to try others in the future. Mr. Weiner's novel, *Station Gehenna*, is just out from *Isaac Asimov Presents*, and Mr. Green's novel, *Barking Dogs*, is due out soon from St. Martin's Press.

art: George Thompson

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1.

The Fifth Avenue Monorail raced past the office window, almost close enough to touch. A commuter special, the passengers packed together like pilchards in a can. Absently, Leeman counted off the canary yellow cars. Seven. Eight. "Nine," he said, aloud.

"Sorry?" asked Stern.

"Nine," he said. "Nine cars."

"I see."

What do you see? Leeman wondered.

He turned, reluctantly, from the window. Stern waited expectantly, though nondirectively, his face gleaming in the early morning sunlight.

"You want me to talk?" Leeman asked.

"That's up to you."

Leeman began to pace. Sometimes it helped him to think, this pacing. But it had failed to work that trick for some time now. He was just too tired and too confused to think straight anymore, and he would have to face that fact.

Twenty minutes gone already of this appallingly expensive hour, and no progress at all. In fact, there had been no significant progress for three months. Not since the dreams started.

Started to drive him out of his mind.

"It's like this. They're coming to get me."

Stern blinked.

"They're coming to get me," Leeman repeated.

"Who?" asked Stern. Again.

Leeman thought once again of the spaceships, black dots in the sky, all over the sky, sinking lower, spinning larger with every turn.

"I've told you."

Stern nodded.

"I dream about them," Leeman said. "Every night."

"A recurring nightmare . . ."

"A vision," Leeman said. "Of the future."

Stern frowned. "You believe that your dreams foretell the future."

Leeman shrugged. "I know it. Believe it and know it."

Stern hesitated, then tried to make a tentative inroad. "Like anyone else, though, you must have dreams that are only dreams, dreams that are meaningless, at least in literal terms, although they may well be meaningful at some other level."

Leeman nodded. "I have those dreams too. But I can tell the difference."

"And these ships come only for you?"

Leeman paused. "As far as I know."

"Fascinating. A fascinating symbol of transformation in the Jungian sense . . ."

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"Symbol? Transformation?" He looked slowly at Stern. The other man met his eyes. "It's true. They're coming."

Stern shuffled the papers on his desk. "Your work: private investigations . . . It must involve stress, tensions . . ."

Leeman began to feel afraid. No one would believe him. That was becoming clearer.

His hour droned on, punctuated at regular intervals by the Fifth Avenue Monorail.

2.

Isaac Matthias, First Proctor of the Saints of the Last Sunrise, surveyed the classroom. It was full of new recruits, eager faces.

Better and better, he thought.

The class had fallen into respectful silence upon his entry.

"Continue," he told the teacher, a thin, middle-aged woman.

"There is no safety," she said, "below the third level. So there is no salvation yet. Accepting the truth is only the beginning. You must work diligently in its furtherance, strive toward the great light that will shine when we awaken the God."

"When we awaken the God," the class echoed, ritually.

Matthias surveyed the pupils, would-be acolytes. His gaze fell upon a boy in the far corner of the room. Noticing the Proctor's attention, he quickly faced front, unsettled.

So young, Matthias thought. We get them younger and younger. I shall gather all the little children unto me, like Jesus. But unlike Jesus, I will succeed. This is the difference.

Something, he thought. Something familiar about the boy. Something he could not quite place.

Matthias pointed. "The boy in the corner."

Silence.

He turned to the teacher. "His name?"

"Tucker Williamson."

"Who shall be reborn when we awaken the God, and be renamed."

"When we awaken the God," the class echoed.

Williamson, he thought. "Do you have any kinfolk?"

The boy was silent.

"Tucker," said the teacher. "Answer the First Proctor."

"A sister. Louise. An unbeliever."

Matthias turned to the teacher. "Send for her," he said.

3.

Kim Singh MacDonald, Director General of the UN Government, glared at his Chief of Security. "And what else?"

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"Nothing else. That's all we know."

Irving Greenfield, the Security Chief, was perspiring heavily.

"Spaceships," MacDonald said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Out of deep space. I don't know what I'm hearing."

"They may not be spaceships at all. But we'll know soon enough. We estimate four hours before we can make a detailed visual inspection. Eight until their arrival."

MacDonald shook his head. "This is unbelievable." He stared at Greenfield. "It's got to be linked."

"With Pluto?"

"Yes."

Greenfield said nothing.

"Don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know!" MacDonald had let his poise slip.

"It's possible."

"Six months ago we discover the first alien life form. An enormous sleeping slug, or something. Out of nowhere we get a new church. And now this. And you think it's all coincidence?"

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't know."

"Have you had any of the visions?"

"No."

MacDonald ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Me neither. Sometimes I think I'm the only one who doesn't have them after I read the papers or listen to the news." He walked to the window and looked up. "The Last Sunrise people say it's God or something, just waiting to rise. They say it speaks to them in their sleep." He turned around. "And now we've got ships coming out of the fucking sky!"

Greenfield glanced down. He didn't know what to say.

4.

Before he had entered the building that housed his office, Leeman had involuntarily glanced up at the sky. *Soon*, he thought. *Very soon now.*

There was a young woman sitting in his outer office.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not taking on any new clients."

Immediately, wordlessly, the girl began to cry.

"I can refer you to someone else," he said.

She stifled her tears. "The vision said you."

For a moment he was speechless. Then: "What vision?" He felt like Stern, and hated himself for his skepticism.

"You know."

He did know.

"It's my brother. He's being brainwashed by the Last Sunrise people."

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His choice, thought Leeman. Took out insurance on the apocalypse.

"He's just thirteen," she said. "A child."

"Old enough to specify his own form of worship."

She passed him a crumpled piece of paper. "Isaac Matthias wants to see me."

Leeman stared at the note.

"What is it," he asked, "that you want from me?"

"I want you to come with me. Protect me."

5.

"Ship Six," said the radio acolyte, "still fails to respond."

And never will again, Harmon thought. *Ship Six is all washed up and we might as well forget all about it right now.*

"Try again," said Max Harmon, who would be renamed when the God awakened. He was both Sub-Proctor of the Saints of the Last Sunrise and Commander of the Pluto mission. "One more time."

Make them answer. Please make them answer. Let them be alive.

The radio acolyte looked back at the older man. But he obeyed, trying yet again to reestablish contact with the sixth ship of the Saints' fleet.

Two down, Harmon thought. *Oh my God. Wake up. Please.*

Fear burned like fire in his stomach.

We'll all die, he thought. We will survive nothing. We will all die out here in interplanetary space without ever setting eyes on God.

Wake up! he thought. *Wake up, Goddamn you!*

The ship rushed on, nearer and nearer to Pluto.

6.

The Saints of the Last Sunrise had acquired an entire block on Park Avenue. "It will come," intoned the giant figure of Isaac Matthias, thirty feet high, from the massive screen above the entrance to the main building. "The last sunrise. When we awaken the God."

"When we awaken the God," echoed the faithful.

"And when the Great Light burns," Matthias said, "only we shall survive. The chosen Saints."

What, Leeman wondered, *am I getting myself into?*

He rode in tight-lipped silence in the smooth, high-speed, direct elevator to the office suite of Isaac Matthias.

7.

Isaac Matthias sat at his vast, slate desk, listening attentively to the summary his secretary presented. The regional reports were in. Up. Recruitment was up everywhere. America, Europe, Asia.

Everywhere.

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"Give me the latest on the Pluto fleet," he said.

"They're establishing orbit around Pluto." The secretary paused. "Three ships lost."

Matthias let some silence settle before continuing. "Send a message to Max Harmon," he said. "Message runs: Have faith. Isaac."

Troubled, he pushed back from his desk and sighed.

8.

Max Harmon received strange and disturbing news from the observation room. He went at once to confirm it with his own eyes. He returned to the bridge in a daze.

"What does it mean?" he asked the radio acolyte. "Is it a sign? Of what?"

The acolyte shrugged.

"Inform Isaac. Ask for instructions."

9.

Louise Williamson entered the office with Leeman at her side. The secretary closed the door silently behind her as she left them.

Matthias appraised her. "Who is this person?" he asked her.

"My bodyguard," she said.

"You're misguided," he told her. "You need no protection. It is here that you will be saved. Send him away."

"I want my brother back."

Leeman did not move.

Isaac Matthias pondered the man's presence. Then he picked up the vidphone. "Send Tucker Williamson in to see me." He replaced the unit in its cradle and sat back. *Why*, he thought, *did I summon this woman here? And why is this man with her? Because*, he reflected, *I had no choice. We had no choice.*

None of us.

It has gone beyond us.

Visions.

10.

"We can't sit on this any longer. There's been a leak. The networks are calling." Irving Greenfield looked haggard.

"What do they know?" asked MacDonald.

"The ships. The ones coming. The fleet headed toward Pluto. Everything."

"The Last Sunrise people?"

"Yes."

MacDonald was silent.

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"They claim they have interceded with God, or as they call him, the God. They claim the ships are being summoned by the God to wreak his judgment. Against us. Against all of us."

"Except them. Except the chosen. The Saints."

"It's what they say."

"And what do our people say?"

Greenfield shrugged. "Nothing. They don't know what's happening."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"What if they're right?"

Greenfield said nothing.

"What if this *is* it? The last sunrise? The end? A final reckoning?"

"It's a pretty fantastic notion. You must admit."

"Have you had any of these visions?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Maybe we just weren't chosen." His smile was wry, his eyes distant.

11.

Black dots, swarming like locusts, darkening the sky. Ships. Thousands of ships.

"No," screamed Leeman. "Away. Away from me."

He came out of his vision shouting, his head aching. He was still in Matthias's office, with the girl and her brother. Matthias was watching him. He tried standing, but dizziness overwhelmed him; he sat back down.

"You saw something," said Matthias.

Leeman nodded.

Matthias waited.

"They did it," Leeman said.

"Did what?"

The boy and his sister watched him in silence.

Leeman looked up. "Max Harmon and the Pluto fleet. They really did it."

No one said anything.

"Woke up God," Leeman said. "They woke up God."

12.

God had moved.

That was the news that Harmon had received. It was why he was here, now, at the foot of the slope leading to the crest of the massive crater, in the permanent icy twilight that was Pluto's shroud.

I can't do it, he thought. I can't look at the God. I'll be struck blind.

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But he, along with millions of others, had already seen the sleeping form, on video footage from the Probe.

This was different, though. He could soon reach out and touch his maker if he chose.

Have faith, Isaac had said. Just have faith.

Isaac had faith. Faith that they would succeed. Wake up the God.

And we will, he thought. Because there's no other choice. For the sake of everyone on Earth. Not just us, not just the Saints, but everyone. I don't believe the God is really going to wipe out everyone below the third level, no matter what Isaac says.

The God will awake, he thought, when we are awake. And that is what Isaac has been doing: waking us up. And he did it. Our coming here proves that we're awake now, and the God will surely understand this.

The ships. Where do they come into this? We must move fast, he thought, as he scrambled up the slope of the crater of the God.

13.

"The ships," Leeman said. "They're coming for me." He felt surprisingly calm. It was all settled now; he really couldn't fight it any longer. They were coming for him and that was the end of the matter.

"You're wrong," Tucker told him. "The God is sending them to save us."

"I don't know about any Gods," Leeman said.

Isaac Matthias watched the three of them. They were a part of the grand plan, he realized. Its form was crystallizing for him. He could see it. This is how it is. How it has to be. Man, woman, and child.

And visions.

14.

Harmon looked down into the crater.

It was gray, the God, a powdery gray color. And vast. Perhaps fifty miles long and ten miles in girth, according to the exobiologists. Although he could see only a small fraction of this tremendous bulk, he did not doubt that estimate. The God was the biggest creature known to man—the biggest thing he, himself, had ever seen.

Could it be something else? A sort of cosmic earthworm?

Then why the visions? Why the ships?

Have faith, he told himself, biting down hard on his tongue to cut off this flow of thought. Have faith.

15.

Louise, following Leeman to the roof, found him sitting with his back to the stack of the ventilation system, staring upward at the sky.

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"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Give myself up," he said. "Make it easy on everyone. I'm the one they want, after all."

"You really believe it," she said. "You really think they're coming here just to get you."

He continued to stare upward.

"Why don't you hide?"

He looked at her, then at the boy who was just emerging from the rooftop door. "You can't hide from your dreams," he said. "One way or another, they get you every time."

16.

"Bring the lasers," said Harmon.

It's time, he thought. Time you woke up and faced us. Your creatures.

He stared down at the God.

You can't go on sleeping and ignoring us. We can't stand it.

He looked around at the men with him. The atmosphere was heavy with fear, the most palpable substance surrounding all of them, here on Pluto, at the end of the solar system.

We're all afraid, he thought. Terribly afraid. Afraid that he'll wake up and kill us all. Afraid that he won't wake up and that we'll just die here. Afraid of everything.

In his presence.

The laser beams flickered out and touched the skin of the God, burning into the gray mass of its body.

We must not give up, he thought.

Visions.

17.

"Phone him," said MacDonald.

Greenfield sat across from him.

"Tell him we want to talk. Tell him we want to know what's going on. Tell him anything, for Christ's sake. But get him to tell me if there's anything we should do."

Greenfield shifted in his seat.

"We're supposed to be the leaders, and we don't know what the hell's going on. This isn't politics. I don't understand this. Any of it. Do you?"

Greenfield reached for the vidphone to call Isaac Matthias.

18.

"We've got to stop this," said the acolyte, his voice tinny in Harmon's suit. "We must be hurting him."

"You've got it wrong," Harmon said, calmly, staring down into the

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crater pit as the incredibly thick skin of the God began to darken and crumble under the onslaught of the energy beams. "He's hurting us. And always has."

Worm, he thought, savagely. Wake up you stupid goddamn worm. Wake up and get us out of here. Put an end to all this nonsense right now. Is that too much to ask?

19.

The black dots were everywhere in the sky, spinning lower and lower, blotting out the sun.

"Go inside," Leeman said. "Get off the roof, quickly."

"No," Louise said. Tucker stood motionless beside her.

There seemed to be thousands of them. Ships everywhere.

For me, he thought. *They've come for me.*

"For us."

He looked at Louise and Tucker.

"The three of us," she said.

The boy's face was innocent, accepting.

"Isaac knew. Somehow. That's why we're here. The three of us."

"How could he know?"

"Visions," she said.

He stared at them.

"Just us? Only us?" he asked.

"I don't know. Does it matter? Everyone thinks it's just them. For everything."

The roof of the building was bathed in light.

20.

MacDonald watched the scene with the ships over Park Avenue and the three on the rooftop on his television screen, while at the same time keeping Isaac Matthias on the vidphone channel on his desk. Matthias was watching his monitors too.

"They were chosen," Matthias was saying.

MacDonald watched in reverential silence. This is incredible, he thought. Chosen for what? What's going on?

In the midst of the surreal spectacle, the Director General of the UN Government was forming his own theory, a bizarre tangent to logical thought. But logical thought had betrayed him. It had abandoned them all.

As he watched the light wash over the three on the rooftop, he became convinced at some profound level that Leeman, and Leeman alone, had created the ships, called them into being out of the deepest vestiges of his ancestral unconscious mind. Created them using some psychic power

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quite beyond anything anyone had ever dreamed possible. Leeman had not seen the future, as he had told Matthias. He had shaped it, in his own image. This was his own paranoid vision that they were all enmeshed in—a hypnotic delusion of global proportion.

It was the only explanation, thought MacDonald.

We have always seen the world through the eyes of those with the greatest visionary powers. This is the next step. This is an evolution. A global epiphany. The needs of the many pinpointed with awesome force on the persons he was watching.

Salvation. What we all seek.

The trinity on the roof shimmered in the light.

21.

"People," said Matthias to MacDonald, on the other end of the vidphone, "always want everything explained. All the loose ends tied up. As if that was ever really possible. Life is messy. It resists form. But together, we have all given it form. Finally." He turned to watch the ships retreating into the sky, like an immense flock of starlings reeling from a tall oak against the afternoon sun. They had left after visiting, after touching, the three on the roof, the three who were all of them. "The problem is that we are dealing with forces completely beyond our comprehension. Always."

MacDonald listened, watched. "That thing on Pluto," he said. "Is it God?"

"It is asleep. We have been sleeping. Everyone. Leeman's mind has awakened. All our minds are awakening. It will wake too."

"We created it? You created it?"

"It is a circle. Everything creates everything else."

"Why a worm? A slug?"

"Should it be a winged horseman? An avuncular figure? There are too many concepts, too many racial and cultural concepts, all flowing together. Its amorphous size contains all. It accepts every interpretation. It is our creation. We are its."

"Props," muttered MacDonald.

"Pardon?"

"Props," repeated MacDonald. "In a metaphysical drama."

"You must look within rather than without at this critical juncture," said Isaac Matthias of the Saints of the Last Sunrise. "That is always the way. No matter what the God's size or power."

22.

The ground was rocking now, beginning to undulate gently under their

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feet. Giant fissures began to open up in the sides of the crater. Max Harmon, who would be renamed, fought to keep his balance.

"Earthquake!" screamed an acolyte. "Run!"

Run where? Harmon thought.

Behind him, the ships of the fleet were toppling over one by one, cracking open like eggshells.

"We'll die," said the acolyte. "All die."

"Not necessarily," Harmon said.

He watched as the God continued to writhe and thrash its massive, shapeless bulk along the crater floor, as it continued its long and awesome process of awakening here on frozen Pluto.

"Not necessarily at all." ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Our February cover story is an unusual one, **O. Niemand's** "Put Your Hands Together." O. Niemand is the pseudonym of a well-known science fiction writer, who, for a number of years now, has been producing a string of science fiction stories written as *hommages* in the voices of various prominent American authors. In the past, Niemand has offered us *hommages* to Thurber, Steinbeck, Damon Runyon, and Hemingway, among others. In "Put Your Hands Together," Niemand takes us to the domed asteroid city of Springfield for a wry tale of faith and redemption in the style of Flannery O'Connor. **Harry Turtledove** is also on hand for February, and from the airless wastes of Springfield he takes us to the trackless wilderness of an alternate frontier America for "Trapping Run," the latest and perhaps the most touching story in his well-known "Sims" series. **Bruce McAllister** then takes us to the steaming jungles and lethal slums of Brazil for a hard-hitting, tough-minded, and yet curiously lyrical tale, "Songs from a Far Country," a story thematically related—although not quite a sequel—to last year's powerful "Dream Baby."

Also in February: the amazing **Neal Barrett, Jr.** returns with "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus," one of the most joyously gonzo Post-Holocaust stories ever written, complete with robot hookers, Rogue Insurance Men, and seven-foot-tall machine-gun-toting mutant possums; British author **Gwyneth Jones,** author of the critically-acclaimed novel *Divine Endurance,* makes her *IAsfm* debut with "The Eastern Succession," a disquieting tale of politics, ambition, and dissent in a *very* strange society; and **Alexander Jablokov** returns with the chilling "Deathbinder," one of the most haunting stories you're likely to see this year. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 12, 1988.

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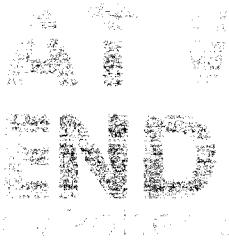

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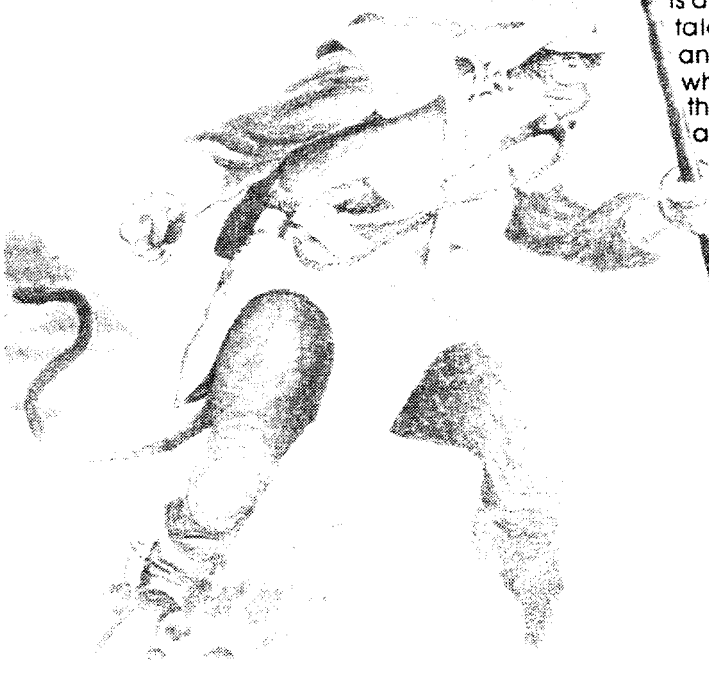
Robert Silverberg recently returned home from Brighton, England —the site of the 1987 World Science Fiction Convention—with a Hugo award for his novella, "Gilgamesh in the Outback" (*IAsfm*, July 1986). While readers of *IAsfm* can look forward to the further exploits of Gilgamesh, the following story will take you very far, indeed, from the depths of Hell.

"At Winter's End" is a stunning tale of men and women who, some thousands and thousands of years in the future, have had to learn to survive on an Earth ravaged by catastrophe.

art: Ed Kline



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An axe-age, a sword-age, shields shall be sundered;
A wind-age, a wolf-age, ere the world falls.

The sun turns black. Earth sinks in the sea,
The hot stars down from heaven are whirled;
Fierce grows the steam and the life-feeding flame
Till fire leaps high about heaven itself.

—The Elder Edda

Everyone on earth had known, for a million years or more, that the death-stars were coming, that the Great World was doomed. One could not deny them; one could not hide from them. They had come before and they would come again, for their time was immutable, every twenty-six million years, and their time had come round once more. One by one they would crash down from the skies, falling without mercy for thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years, bringing fire, darkness, dust, smoke, cold, and death: an endless winter of sorrows. Each of the peoples of earth addressed its fate in its own way, for genetics is destiny, even for life-forms that have no genes. The vegetals and the sapphire-eyes people knew that they would not survive, and they made their preparations accordingly. The mechanicals knew that they would, but did not care to. The sea-lords understood that their day was done and were content. The hjjk-folk, who yielded no advantage willingly, expected to come through the cataclysm unharmed, and set about making certain of that.

And the humans—the humans—

It was a day like no day that the tribe could remember. Sometimes half a year or more went by in the cocoon of Koshmar's little tribe without a single event worthy of entering in the chronicles. But that morning there were three extraordinary happenings within the span of an hour, and after that hour life would never again be the same for Koshmar and her people.

The first startling thing was the discovery of a phalanx of ice-worms approaching the cocoon from below: ponderous monsters, drilling their way slowly upward through earth and rock, heading straight for the dwelling-chamber of the tribe.

Viggoran was the one who came upon them. He was the tribe's old man, the keeper of the chronicles. For weeks now he had been wandering about searching for shinestones in the ancient passageways below the cocoon, where his remote ancestors had taken refuge from the exploding

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stars and black rains that had destroyed the Great World. No one in the past ten thousand years had found a shinestone in those passageways. But Viggoran had dreamed three times this year that he would, and so he went prowling down there almost every day.

He moved now through the deepest and coldest tunnel of all, the one called Mother of Frost. As he crept cautiously on hands and knees in the darkness, striving to train his second sight on the shinestones that he hoped were embedded in the walls of the passageway somewhere close ahead, he felt a sudden tingling and trembling. It ran through the whole length of his sensing-organ, from the place at the base of his spine where it sprouted from his body all the way out to its tip, and the sensation was unmistakable. He was getting a clear emanation of life nearby: something huge turning and turning below him, like a sluggish auger drilling through stone. Something alive, here in these lightless depths, roaming the mountain's cold dark heart.

Awed, alarmed, Viggoran sought a clearer reading. He put his cheek to the tunnel's stone floor. He pressed the pads of his fingers against the chilly rock. He aimed his second sight outward and downward. He swept his sensing-organ from side to side in a wide arc.

Stronger sensations, undeniable and incontrovertible, came flooding through his receptors. A living thing: yes. Dull-witted, practically mindless, but definitely alive, throbbing with strange intense vitality. And not at all far away. It was separated from him, he perceived, by nothing more than a layer of rock a single arm's-length wide. Gradually its image took form for him: an immense limbless thick-bodied creature standing on its tail within a vertical tunnel scarcely broader than itself. It was moving up through the mountain with inexorable determination, cutting a path for itself by gnawing on rock, digesting it, excreting it at the far end of a massive fleshy body twenty man-lengths long.

Nor was it the only one of its kind making the ascent. From the right and the left, now, Viggoran pulled in other heavy pulsing emanations—three of the great beasts, five, maybe a dozen of them, each confined in its own narrow tunnel, embarked upon an unhurried journey upward.

"Ice-worms," Viggoran muttered. "Is it possible?"

Shaken, astounded, he crouched motionless, listening in horror to the pounding of the huge animals' souls.

Ice-worms, yes. He was certain of it. What else could they be? The oldest pages of the tribal chronicles told of them: vast creatures that the gods had called into being in the first days of the long winter, when the less hardy denizens of the Great World were perishing of the darkness and the cold. They made their homes in the black deep places of the earth, and needed neither air nor light nor warmth, indeed shunned such

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things as poisons; and the prophets had said that a time would come at winter's end when the ice-worms would begin to rise toward the surface, until at last they emerged into the bright light of day to meet their doom. Now they had commenced their climb.

So, then, was the endless winter at last reaching its end? Perhaps it was, Viggoran thought; or perhaps these ice-worms merely were confused. The chronicles testified that there had been plenty of false omens before this. It made no difference, either way. One thing was certain. The tribe was going to have to abandon its cocoon.

For the upward route of these monsters, Viggoran saw, would carry them crashing through the heart of the tribal dwelling-chamber. There could be no doubt of that: they would be coming up right below the place of the altar-stone. And the tribe was no more capable of halting them in their blind ascent than it would be of trapping an onrushing death-star in a net of woven grass.

Far above the cavern where Viggoran knelt eavesdropping on the ice-worms, Torlyri the twining-partner of Koshmar the chieftain was at that moment preparing to make the daily sunrise offering at the exit hatch of the cocoon.

She was a tall, gentle woman of great beauty and sweetness of soul. Her fur was a lustrous black, banded with two astonishing bright spirals of white that ran the whole length of her body. Powerful muscles rippled beneath her skin. Her eyes were soft and dark, her smile was warm and easy. Everyone in the tribe loved Torlyri. But for the mildness of her spirit she might well have become chieftain herself and not Koshmar; but beauty and strength alone are insufficient. A chieftain must not be mild.

Each morning for the past nine years—ever since old Thekmur had reached the limit-age and Koshmar had taken her place as chieftain—Torlyri had made the same journey: out of the cocoon by the sky-side, up and up and up through the interior of the cliff along the winding maze of steep narrow corridors that led toward the crest, and at last to the flat area at the top, the Place of Going Out. The rite she performed there was her most important responsibility to the tribe.

There, each morning, Torlyri unfastened the exit hatch and stepped across the threshold, cautiously passing a little way into the outer world. The other members of the tribe crossed that threshold no more than three times in their lives, on their naming-day, their twining-day, and their death-day, except for the chieftain, who saw the outer world a fourth time, on her crowning-day. But Torlyri had the privilege and the burden of entering the outer world each morning of her life. Even she was permitted to go only as far as the offering-stone, six paces beyond the gate.

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Upon that holy stone she would place her offering-bowl, containing some little things of the inner world, a few glowberries or some yellow strands of wall-thatching or a bit of charred meat; and then she would empty yesterday's bowl of its offerings and gather something of the outer world to take within, a handful of earth, a scattering of pebbles, half a dozen blades of redgrass. That daily interchange was essential to the well-being of the tribe. What it said to the gods each day was, *We are of the world, we are in the world, even though we must live apart from it at this time. Some day we will come forth again, and this is the token of our pledge.*

Arriving now at the Place of Going Out, Torlyri set down her offering-bowl and gripped the handwheel that opened the hatch. It was no trifling thing to turn that wheel, but it moved easily under her hands. Torlyri was proud of her strength. Neither Koshmar nor any man of the tribe could equal her at arm-standing, at kick-wrestling, at cavern-soaring.

The gate opened. Torlyri stepped through. The keen, sharp air of morning stung her nostrils.

The sun was just coming up. Its chilly red glow filled the eastern sky, and the swirling dust-motes that danced on the frosty air seemed to flare and blaze with an inner fire. Beyond the ledge on which she stood Torlyri saw the broad, swift river far below gleaming with the same crimson stain of morning light.

Once that great river had been known as the Hallimalla by those who lived along its banks, and before that it had been called the Sipsimutta, and at an even earlier time its name was the Mississippi. Torlyri knew nothing of any of that. To her, the river was simply the river. All those other names were forgotten now, and had been for hundreds of thousands of years. There had been hard times upon the earth since the coming of the long winter. The Great World itself was lost; why then should its names have survived?

The cocoon in which the forty members of Koshmar's little tribe had spent all their lives—and where their ancestors had huddled since time immemorial, waiting out the unending winter that the falling death-stars had brought—was a snug cozy burrow hollowed out of the side of a lofty bluff rising high above that great river. At first, so said Viggoran the chronicler, those humans who had survived the early days of black rains and frightful cold had been content to live in mere caves, eating roots and nuts and catching such meat-creatures as they could. Then the winter had deepened and the plants and wild animals vanished from the world. Had human ingenuity ever faced a greater challenge? But the cocoon was the answer: the self-sufficient buried enclosure, dug into hillsides and cliffs well above any likely snow-line. Small groups of people, their numbers strictly controlled by breeding regulations, occupied the cocoon's insulated central chamber. Clusters of luminescent glow-

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berries afforded light; intricate ventilation shafts provided fresh air; water was pumped up from underground streams. Crops and livestock, elegantly adapted to life under artificial illumination, were raised in surrounding chambers. The cocoons were little island-worlds entirely complete in themselves, each as isolated as though it were bound on a solitary voyage across the deep night of space. And in them the tribes of human folk waited out the time, by centuries and tens of centuries, until the day when the gods would grow weary of hurling death-stars at the world.

Torlyri went to the offering-stone, set down her bowl, picked up yesterday's bowl to empty it of its offering. She looked past the rim of the ledge toward the river, and the thought came to her, as it sometimes did, of what it might be like to clamber down the side of the cliff and touch the tips of her fingers to that mysterious potent current.

It would burn like fire, Torlyri thought. But it would be cool fire, a purifying fire. She imagined herself wading out into the river, knee-deep, thigh-deep, belly-deep, feeling the cold blaze of the water swirling up over her loins and her sensing-organ. Setting out across the river, toward the other bank that was so far away she could barely see it—walking through the water, or perhaps atop it as legend said the water-strider folk did, walking on and on toward the sunrise land, never once to see the cocoon again—

Torlyri smiled. What foolishness, indulging in these fantasies! And what treason to the tribe, if the offering-woman herself were to take advantage of her hatch-freedom and desert the cocoon! But there was a strange pleasure in pretending that she might someday do such a thing. One could at least dream of it. Almost everyone, she suspected, now and then looked with longing toward the outer world and had a moment's dream of escaping into it, though surely few would admit to that. Torlyri had heard that there were those over the centuries who, growing weary of cocoon life, actually had slipped through the hatch and down to the river and into the wild lands beyond. Of course they had never returned; they must have died almost at once in that harsh world out there. To go outside was madness, she thought. But a tempting madness.

She knelt to collect what she needed for the inward offering.

Then out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of movement. She whirled, startled, turning back toward the hatch just in time to see the small slight figure of a boy dart through it and race across the ledge to the rim.

Torlyri reacted without thinking. He had already begun scrambling over the ledge; but she pivoted, moved to her left, grabbed at him fiercely, managed to catch him by one heel just before he disappeared. He yowled

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and kicked, but she held him fast, reeling him in, hauling him up, throwing him down onto the ledge beside her.

His eyes were wide with fright. But there was defiance in them too, Torlyri thought. He was looking past her, trying to get a glimpse of the hills and the river. She stood poised over him, half expecting him to make another desperate lunge around her.

"Hresh," she said. "Yes, of course. Hresh. Who else but you would try something like this?" He was eight, Minbain's boy, wild and headstrong. Hresh-full-of-questions, they called him, bubbling as he was with unlawful curiosities. Everyone said of him that he had been born for trouble. But this was no trifling scrape he had gotten himself into now. Torlyri shook her head sadly. "Have you gone crazy? What did you think you were doing?"

Softly he said, "I just wanted to see what's out here, Torlyri! The sky. The river. Everything."

"You would have seen all that on your naming-day."

He shrugged. "But that's a whole year away! I couldn't wait that long."

"The law is the law, Hresh. We all obey, for the good of all. Are you above the law?"

Sullenly he said, "I just wanted to see. Only for a single day, Torlyri!"

"Do you know what happens to those who break the law?"

He frowned. "Not really. But it's something bad, isn't it? What will you do to me?"

"Me? Nothing. It's up to Koshmar."

"Then what will *she* do to me?"

"Anything. I don't know. People have been put to death for doing what you tried to do."

"Death?" he gasped.

"Expelled from the cocoon. That's certain death. No human could survive out there alone for very long."

In a hushed voice Hresh said, "Would they do that to *me*?"

"Everything is in Koshmar's hands."

There was sudden panic in the boy's eyes. "But you won't tell her, will you? Will you, Torlyri?" His expression grew guileful. "You don't have to say anything, do you? You almost didn't notice me, after all. Another moment and I'd have been past you and over the edge, and I would just have stayed out till tomorrow morning, and nobody would have been the wiser. I mean, it isn't as though I *hurt* anybody. I just wanted to see the river."

She sighed. His terrified, pleading look was hard to resist. And, truly, what harm had he done? He hadn't managed to get more than ten paces outside. She could understand his yearning to discover what lay beyond the walls of the cocoon: that boiling curiosity, that horde of unanswered

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questions that must rage in him all the time. She had felt something of that herself, though her spirit, she knew, had little of the fire that must possess this troubled boy. But the law was the law, and he had broken it. She could ignore that only at the peril of her own soul.

"Please, Torlyri—"

She shook her head. Without taking her eyes from the boy, she scooped together what she needed for the inward offering. Then she indicated with a gesture that he was to precede her through the hatch. He looked terrified. Gently, Torlyri said, "I have no choice, Hresh. I have to take you to Koshmar."

Long ago, someone had mounted a narrow strip of black stone at eye-level along the central chamber's rear wall. No one knew why it had been put there originally, but over the years it had come to be sacred to the memory of the tribe's departed chieftains. Koshmar made a point of brushing her fingertips across it and whispering the names of the six who had ruled most recently before her, whenever she felt apprehensive over the future of the tribe. It was her quick way of invoking the power of her predecessors' spirits, asking them to enter into her and guide her to do the right thing:

— Thekmur Nialli Sismoil Yanla Vork Lirridon —

Lately she had begun touching the strip of black stone every day, and then two or three times each day. She was having premonitions: of what, she could not say, but she felt that some great transformation must be descending upon the world, and that she would stand soon in need of much guidance. The stone was comforting in such a moment.

Koshmar had invented the little rite herself. She wondered if her successor would continue it, with the name of Koshmar added to the list. It was almost time to begin thinking of a successor, Koshmar knew. She would be thirty this year. Five years more and she would reach the limit-age. Her death-day would come, as it had come for Thekmur and Nialli and Sismoil and all the rest, and they would take her to the exit hatch and send her outside to perish in the cold. It was the way, unalterable, unanswerable: one must make room for those who are to come.

She closed her eyes and touched her fingers to the black stone and stood quietly, a husky, broad-shouldered woman at the height of her strength and power, praying for help. *Thekmur Nialli Sismoil Yanla Vork—*

Torlyri burst into the chamber just then, dragging Minbain's unruly brat Hresh, the one who was forever sneaking around poking his nose into this place and that one where he had no business. The boy was howling and squirming and frantically writhing in Torlyri's grasp, and

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his eyes were wild, as though he had just seen a death-star plummeting down toward the roof of the cocoon.

Koshmar, startled and angered by the intrusion, swung around to face them. "What's this? What has he done now?"

"I went outside to make the offering," Torlyri began, "and an instant later out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of—"

Viggoran entered the chamber at that moment, looking nearly as wild-eyed as Hresh. He was waving his arms and sensing-organ around in a strange crazed way, and his voice came in such a thick blurting rush that Koshmar could barely make out what he was trying to say. "Ice-worms—the cocoon—right underneath, coming straight up—it's the truth, Koshmar, it's the prophecy—" And all the while Hresh continued to whimper and yowl, and soft-voiced Torlyri was going steadily on with her story.

"One at a time!" Koshmar cried. "I can't hear anything that anybody's saying!" She glared at the old chronicler, white-furred and bowed—the one member of the tribe who was permitted to live out the fullness of his days, in regard for the precious deep knowledge of the past that he alone carried. "Ice-worms? Did you say ice-worms?"

Viggoran was trembling. He muttered something murky and faint that was drowned out by Hresh's panicky outcries. Koshmar glared at her twining-partner and snapped, "Torlyri, why *is* that child in here?"

"I've been trying to tell you. I caught him trying to slip through the hatch."

"What?"

"I only wanted to see the river!" Hresh howled. "Just for a little while!"

"You know the law, Hresh?"

"It was just for a little while!"

Koshmar sighed. "How old is he, Torlyri?"

"Eight, I think."

"Then he knows the law. All right, let him see the river. Take him upstairs and put him outside."

Torlyri stiffened in shock. Tears glistened in her eyes. Hresh began to scream and howl again, even louder. But Koshmar had had enough of him. The boy had long been a troublemaker, and the law was clear. To the hatch with him, and good riddance. She made an impatient sweeping gesture of dismissal and swung back to face Viggoran.

"All right. Now: what's this about ice-worms?" she demanded.

The chronicler said shakily, "While I was searching for shinestones in the Mother of Frost, I began picking up a sense of something alive nearby, something big, moving in the rock, something digging a tunnel. I made contact, and I felt an ice-worm mind—I mean, one can't really speak of

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ice-worms having *minds*, but in a manner of speaking they do, and what I felt was—"

Koshmar scowled. "How far away was it?" she broke in.

"Not far at all. And there were others. Perhaps a dozen, all told, close at hand. Koshmar, do you know what this means? It must be the end of winter! The prophets have written, 'When the ice-worms begin to rise—' "

"I know what the prophets have written," Koshmar said brusquely. "These things are coming right up under the dwelling-chamber, you say? Are you sure?"

Viggoran nodded. "They'll smash right through the floor. I don't know how soon—a week, a month, six months—but they're definitely heading straight for us. And they're enormous, Koshmar." He stretched his arms out as far as they could reach. "They're this wide around—maybe even bigger—"

"Gods spare us," Torlyri murmured. And from the boy Hresh came short sharp panting sounds of fear.

Koshmar whirled, exasperated. "Are you two still here? I told you to take him to the hatch, Torlyri! The law is clear. Venture outside the cocoon without lawful leaving-right, and you are forbidden to enter it again. I tell you once more, Torlyri: take him to the hatch."

"But he didn't really leave the cocoon," said Torlyri gently. "He stepped out just a little way, and—"

"No! No more disobedience! Say the words over him and cast him out, Torlyri!" Once again she turned to Viggoran. "Come with me, old man. Show me your ice-worms. We'll be waiting for them with our hatchets when they break through. Big as they are, we'll cut them to pieces as they rise, a slice and a slice and a slice, and then—"

Suddenly a strange sound, a hoarse rasping strangled gurgle, came from the far side of the chamber:

"Aaoouuuaaah!"

"What was that?" Koshmar asked, amazed. It was a sound such as she had never heard before. An ice-worm, perhaps, stirring and yawning as it made ready to smash through the wall of the chamber? Bewildered, Koshmar stared into the dimness. But everything seemed in order over there. There was the tabernacle, there was the cradle where Ryyig Dream-Dreamer slept his eternal sleep, there was the cupboard in which the book of the chronicles was kept—

"Aaoouuuaaah!" Again.

"It's Ryyig!" Torlyri exclaimed. "He's waking up!"

"Gods!" cried Koshmar. "He is! He is!"

Indeed so. Koshmar felt her legs grow weak with awe. Dizziness overwhelmed her and she had to grasp the wall, leaning against the strip of black stone and muttering again and again, *Thekmur Nialli Sismoil,*

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Thekmur Nialli Sismoil. The Dream-Dreamer was sitting bolt upright—when had that ever happened before?—and he had opened his eyes—no one in the memory of the tribe had ever seen the eyes of Ryyig Dream-Dreamer—and he was crying out, he who had never been known to make any sound more vehement than a snore. His hands raked the air, his lips moved. He seemed to be trying to speak, as though he were going to announce the end of the endless winter, as though he were going to say that the time had arrived for Koshmar to lead her people out of their cocoon into the new springtime of the world.

"Aaoouuuaaah!" cried Ryyig Dream-Dreamer a third time.

Then he closed his eyes and sank back into his unending dream.

He had been awake only a moment; the whole thing had come and gone so swiftly that even those who had witnessed it could not fully believe they had seen what they had seen and heard what they had heard. And now Ryyig Dream-Dreamer was lost once more in his mysteries, eyes shut, breast rising and falling so slowly that he seemed almost to be a statue. So perhaps the time was not really yet at hand, Koshmar thought. But surely it was coming. Surely it could not be far off.

Even before today, even before Viggoran had come babbling to her with his talk of ice-worms and this nuisance of a boy had done the unheard-of thing of trying to slip outside unnoticed, Koshmar had felt changes developing in the rhythms of the tribe's life. Everyone had. There had been a stirring in the cocoon, a ferment of the spirit, a sense of new beginnings about to unfold. The old patterns, which had held for thousands upon thousands of years, were breaking up. Sleep-times had been the first thing to change. No longer was it the custom among the people of the cocoon to spend more of one's time asleep than awake, lying coiled together by twos and threes in intricate furry tangles, lost in hazy dream-fables. Now everyone seemed strangely alert, restless, active.

The youngest ones had felt it soonest, wild little Hresh and lovely sad-eyed Taniane and that brawny, deep-chested boy Orbin. Young ones were supposed to be lively, but no one could remember anything like the maniacal energy that those three displayed: dancing maddeningly in circles for hour after hour, singing and chanting long skeins of nonsense, clambering hand over hand up the shaggy walls of the cocoon and swinging from the ceiling. Hresh trying to get outside this morning—it was all part of the same thing. Then the breeding pairs had caught the fever, Nittin and Nettin, Jalmud and Valmud, Preyne and Threyne. Plainly enough, all three pairs had accomplished their season's work—there was no doubt; you could see the swelling bellies—and yet there they were, coupling all day long anyway as though someone had accused them of

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shirking their duty. And at last the older members of the tribe had been infected by the new restlessness. Koshmar felt it herself: it was like an itch deep down, beneath her fur, beneath the skin itself. Even the ice-worms were rising. These were new times. Great changes were coming. Why else would Ryyig Dream-Dreamer have awakened this morning, even for a moment?

"Koshmar?" Viggoran said finally, when they had all been silent a long while.

She shook her head. "Let me be."

"You said you wanted to go to the ice-worms, Koshmar."

"Not now. If he's awakening, I have to stay by him."

"Can it be?" Torlyri said. "Awakening now?"

"How would I know? You heard what I heard, Torlyri." Koshmar realized that the boy was still in the room, silent now, motionless, frozen with awe. She glanced at him in irritation; then her eyes went to Torlyri's, and she saw the soft pleading there. "Yes," Koshmar said at last, with a sign of acquiescence. "I pardon him, yes. We can't cast anyone out on the day the Dream-Dreamer awakens. But get him out of here this minute. And make sure he knows that if he misbehaves again I'll—I'll—oh, get him out of here, Torlyri! Now!"

All day long Koshmar stood beside the Dream-Dreamer's cradle, watching his eyes moving beneath his pale pink lids. How long, she wondered, had he slept like this? A hundred years? A thousand? According to the tradition of the tribe he had closed his eyes on the first day of the world's long winter and he would not open them again until winter's end; and it was prophesied that the winter would last seven hundred thousand years. All that time, while he slept, his dreaming mind had roved the heavens, seeking out the blazing death-stars that journeyed toward the earth trailing rivers of light, and he would sleep on and on, so it was said, until the last of those frightful stars had fallen from the skies and the world had grown warm again and it was safe for human folk to come forth from their cocoons. Now he had opened his eyes, though only for a moment, and had begun to speak, or at least to make the attempt to speak. What else could he have been doing, if not proclaiming the end of winter? That strangled gurgling sound: surely it heralded the coming of the new age. Torlyri had heard it, and Viggoran, and Hresh, and Koshmar herself. But could that gurgle be trusted? Was this really winter's end? So it seemed. There was the evidence of the ice-worms; there was the evidence of the odd restlessness among the tribe. Now this. Ah, let it be so, Koshmar prayed. Let it happen in my time! Let me be the one to lead the people forth into sunlight!

She peered around warily. It was forbidden to disturb Ryyig Dream-Dreamer in any way. But many things that had been forbidden seemed

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permissible now. She was alone in the chamber. Gently Koshmar put her hand to the Dream-Dreamer's bare shoulder. How strange his skin felt! Like an old worn piece of leather, terribly soft, delicate, vulnerable. His body was not like any of theirs: he was altogether without fur, a naked pink creature with long slender arms and frail little legs that could never have carried him anywhere.

"Ryyig? Ryyig?" Koshmar whispered. "Open your eyes again! Tell me what you are meant to tell!"

He seemed to wriggle a bit in his cradle, as though annoyed by her intrusion on his sleep. His bare forehead furrowed; through his tight lean lips came a faint little whistling sound. His eyes remained closed.

"Ryyig? Tell me: is the time of falling stars over? Will the sun shine again? Is it safe for us to go outside?"

Koshmar thought his eyelids might be flickering. Boldly she rocked him by the shoulder, and then more boldly still, as if she meant to pull him awake by force. Would Thekmur have taken such risks, she wondered? Would Nialli? Perhaps not. No matter. Koshmar shook him again. He uttered a little mewing sound and turned his head away from her.

"You tried to say it before," Koshmar whispered fiercely. "Say it! *The winter is over.* Say it! Say it!"

Suddenly the thin pale lids pulled back. She found herself staring into strange eyes of a deep violet hue, shrouded by dreams and mysteries of which she could never comprehend a thing, and the sight of them, at this close range, was so overwhelming that Koshmar fell back a pace or two. But she recovered quickly.

"Come, everyone!" she called. "He's waking up again! Come! Come quickly!"

The fragile slender figure in the cradle seemed to be struggling once more to a sitting position. Koshmar slipped her arm behind his back and drew him upward. His head wobbled, as if it were too heavy for his neck. Once more that gurgling sound came from him. Koshmar bent low, putting her ear to his mouth. The people were entering from both sides of the chamber now, gathering close around her.

And Ryyig spoke.

"The—winter—"

His voice was feeble but the words were unmistakable.

"The—winter—"

"—is over," Koshmar prompted. "Yes! Yes! Say it! *Why do you wait? The winter is over!*"

A third time: "The—winter—"

The thin lips worked convulsively. Muscles flickered in the fleshless jaws. Ryyig's body sagged against her arm; his shoulders rippled strangely; his eyes went dull and lost their focus.

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Dead?

Yes, Koshmar realized. Dead. No life to him at all. But he had spoken. She lowered his limp form to the cradle and turned triumphantly to her people. The moment had come. Yes, and it had come in the chieftainship of Koshmar, as she had long prayed it would.

"You heard him!" she declared. "*Why do you wait? The winter is over!* We will leave our cocoon. We will leave this mountain: let the ice-worms have it. Come, we have to begin collecting our possessions. We must make ready for the journeying! This is the day we go outside!"

Torlyri said in her mild way, "I heard him say only the words 'the winter,' Koshmar."

Koshmar stared at her in amazement. Now she knew that this was truly a time of great changes, for twice this day the gentle Torlyri had put her will in opposition to that of her twining-partner. Holding back her temper, for she loved Torlyri dearly, Koshmar said, "You heard wrong. His voice was very faint, but I have no doubt of his words. What do you say, Viggoran? Is this not the time of going forth? And you? And you?" She looked about the chamber sternly. No one could meet her gaze. "The winter is over. No more stars will fall. Come, now. Now we humans reclaim the world after this dark time." And she lashed her thick, strong sensing-organ from side to side in great sweeping movements of authority, powerful enough to take the life even of a man. Those movements defied them all to speak against her. But no one spoke. Koshmar saw the boy Hresh staring at her, eyes gleaming with intense excitement. It was agreed. The people of Koshmar's cocoon would go forth to take possession of the world.

"Form the line, there!" Koshmar called. "Shape it up! Everyone in the right place!" She held the Wand of Coming Forth in her left hand, and a spear in her right. A brilliant yellow ribbon was wrapped over her right shoulder and across her breast. Hresh felt himself beginning to shiver. This was the moment at last! The whole tribe stood assembled in the Place of Going Out. Torlyri the sweet-voiced offering-woman was turning the wheel that moved the wall, and the wall was moving.

Cool air came rushing in. The hatch was open.

"All right, forward, now!" Koshmar boomed. "Move along and keep your places, and sing. *Sing!*"

From forty throats at once came the Hymn of the New Springtime. Koshmar and Torlyri passed through the hatch side by side, with Viggoran right behind them, and then Konya, Harruel, Staip, and the rest of the older adults. Hresh, marching third from the end, threw his head back and bellowed the words louder than anyone. Taniane gave him a scornful look, as though his raucous singing offended her dainty ears.

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He stuck his tongue out at her. What did he care for Taniane's opinion? This was the great day at last. The exodus from the cocoon was under way.

They crowded together on the rocky ledge just outside the hatch. Some were crying softly, some were gaping in wonder, some were lost in deep silences. The morning air was cool and crisp and the sun was a great terrifying eye high in the sky on the far side of the river. The sky was a sharp hard color, with thick swirls of dust-haze making spiral patterns in it as the wind caught them. The world stretched away, open in all directions as far as the eye could see: there were no walls, there was nothing at all to confine them. That was the most frightening thing, the *openness* of it. But we will get used to it, Hresh thought. We will have to get used to it.

He knew how lucky he was. Lifetime after lifetime had gone by, thousands of generations of lifetimes, and all that while the people had huddled in their snug cocoons like mice in a hole, telling each other tales of the beautiful world from which the deathstars had driven them. How Hresh had yearned for even a single glimpse of that world! But he had expected to live and die in the cocoon, like everyone else who had existed since the beginning of the long winter, without ever having that glimpse. From old Viggoran he had learned the names of all the ancient lost cities: Valirion, Thisthissima, Vengiboneeza, Tham, Mikkimord, Bannigard, Steenizale, Glorm. Wonderful names! But what was a city? A great many cocoons side by side, Hresh wondered? And the things of nature out there: rivers, mountains, oceans, trees. What were they? To see the sky—just the sky—why, he had almost been ready to give his life for that, the day he had slipped past the sweet offering-woman and out the hatch. He nearly *had* given his life for that, he knew. Would Koshmar really have had him thrown out of the cocoon, if the Dream-Dreamer had not awakened just then? That had been a close one. Hresh had always thought of himself as gifted with luck, under the special protection of the gods; but it surely had seemed as if his luck had run out that day. Very likely they would have pushed him through the hatch into the world he so much yearned to see. Koshmar was a hard one, and the law was the law. And once outside, he knew, he wouldn't have survived half a day on his own. Nobody's luck was that good. But he had been spared, and everything was different now. The tribe was going forth. He would see the sky again, and not just a glimpse this time. He would see the mountains and the oceans. He would see Vengiboneeza and Mikkimord. All the world would be his. Winter was over. So Koshmar had proclaimed; and Koshmar was the chieftain.

"Is that the sky?" Orbin asked. "That blue thing?"

"That's the sky, yes," said Hresh, proud of having been out here before,

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if only for a few minutes. "And that's the river down there. That green stuff is grass. The red stuff is grass of another kind."

"The air tastes funny," Taniane said, wrinkling her nose. "It burns my throat."

"That's because it's cold," Hresh told her. "You won't mind it after a while."

"Why is it cold, if winter is over?" she asked.

"Don't ask stupid questions," Hresh said. But he found himself wondering about that, all the same.

Up ahead, by the offering-stone, Torlyri was busy performing some sort of rite: the last one, Hresh hoped, before the march got really under way. It seemed to him that they had been doing almost nothing but rites and ceremonies these past weeks since that day when the Dream-Dreamer awakened and Koshmar announced that the tribe was going to leave the cocoon.

What an endless time those weeks had been! Hresh had assumed, hearing Koshmar say, "This is the day we go outside," that they really were going to set out that day. But of course there had been a million things to do before they could leave. The death-rites for the weird old Dream-Dreamer, first. Then a bunch of rituals deconsecrating the cocoon, so they would not leave their souls behind. Then the packing of all the sacred objects; and then the slaughtering of most of the tribe's meat-animals, and the curing of the meat. And so on and so on: everything according to instructions that were thousands of years old. By the time it was all carried out, you could hear the ice-worms chomping on the rock just below the dwelling-chamber, a dull ugly rasping sound that went on night and day, night and day. But the ice-worms could have the place, now. The tribe would never return to the cocoon.

"Are we going to cross the river?" Taniane asked.

"I don't think so," Hresh said. "The sun's in that direction, and if we go toward it we can get burned. I think we're going to go the other way."

He was simply guessing, but he turned out to be right, at least about the direction of march. Koshmar—wearing now the Mask of Lirridon that had hung so long on the dwelling-chamber wall, yellow and black with a great beak that made her look like some sort of huge insect—raised her spear and called out four holy names and stepped forward on a narrow track that led up from the ledge to the top of the hill, and over the far side and down the western slope toward a broad valley beyond. One by one the others fell into line behind her, moving slowly under the burdens of their heavy packs. But to Hresh's surprise the sun seemed to be pursuing them, and somewhere about midday it actually overtook them, so that in the afternoon it lay before them in the western sky, getting redder and redder until at last it disappeared. Hresh had not expected the sun

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to travel like that. He suspected that that was only the first of many surprises.

On the third day; as they were descending a series of bare gray rolling hills that opened into a broad green valley, keen-eyed Torlyri spied a strange solitary figure far in the distance. It seemed to be coming toward them. Turning to Viggoran, she said, "Do you see that, old man? What do you think it is? No human, surely!"

Viggoran narrowed his eyes and stared. His sight was nothing so far-reaching as Torlyri's, but his second sight was the sharpest in the tribe, and it showed him plainly the bands of yellow and black on the creature's long body, the fierce beak, the great glittering blue-black eyes, the deep constrictions dividing head from thorax, thorax from abdomen. "No, not a human," he muttered. "Don't you recognize a hjjk-man when you see one?"

"A hjjk-man!" said Torlyri in wonder.

So they too had survived the winter. Well, Viggoran thought, it was just as the chronicles had predicted. The hjjk-folk had been one of the six peoples of the Great World: insect-beings, they were, bloodless and austere. Even at this distance Viggoran could feel the hjjk-man's emanation, dry and cold like this land they were passing through—indifferent, remote.

Viggoran shuffled onward, keeping his place just behind Koshmar and Torlyri. There was a throbbing in his left knee and a stiffness in both his ankles, and the chill wind cut through his fur as though he had none at all. This was a hard business for a man of forty, to give up the comforts of the cocoon and march through this strange bleak countryside. But it was that very strangeness that kept him going, hour after hour, day after day. He had never imagined that such colors existed, such smells, such shapes.

Koshmar said, "We will need to speak with him. Will you be able to understand the hjjk-man's language, Viggoran?"

"No need. I suspect he'll understand ours well enough," said Viggoran gruffly.

Koshmar grinned. "Getting tired, old man?"

"I won't be the first to drop," he replied in a sullen tone.

They were passing now through a parched terrain: the soil was sandy and its surface crunched underfoot, as though no one had walked here in thousands of years. Sparse tufts of stiff blue-green grass sprouted here and there, tough angular stuff that had a glassy sheen. Yesterday Konya had tried to pull up a clump and it cut his fingers; he came away bloody and cursing. Of animal life there was almost none. On the first day they had come upon three large four-legged beasts with great scarlet pronglike

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horns sprouting in triple pairs from their snouts; but they had fled in terror at the first scent of the humans, taking off at an astonishing speed across the plain. That night some sort of many-jointed insects as long as a man's leg had scuttered through their camp, attracted by the light of the fire; Koshmar had speared one and they ate its roasted flesh, but it had no taste at all, only a rough straw-like texture. They had seen a few birds also: otherwise, nothing.

All afternoon long as they descended the last hill they could discern the hjjk-man stolidly advancing in their direction. He reached them just before twilight, when they had come to the valley's eastern edge. Seeming altogether unafraid, though they were forty and he was only one, he halted and waited for them with his middle pair of arms crossed over his thorax.

Viggoran stared intently. To see this creature was like seeing the chronicles come to life. Long ago, in the days of the Great World, these insect-beings had built vast hive-like cities in the lands that were too dry for humans and vegetals or too cold for sapphire-eyes or too moist for mechanicals. If no one else wanted a territory, they would claim it, and once they did there was no relinquishing it. And yet the chroniclers of the Great World had not considered the hjjk-folk the masters of the earth, for all their versatility: that was the place held by the sapphire-eyed ones, so it was written. But the sapphire-eyes, Viggoran knew, could not have survived the winter. Were the hjjk-folk then the masters now?

In the failing light the hjjk-man's body had a dull glimmering sheen. He was banded in alternating strips of black and yellow from the top to the bottom of his long body—he was slender and tall, taller even than Harruel, the tallest man of the tribe—and his hard, angular sharp-beaked face looked much like the Mask of Lirridon that Koshmar had worn on the day of leaving the cocoon. His eyes, enormous and many-faceted, gleamed like dark shinestones. Just below them dangled the segmented coils of bright orange breathing tubes at either side of his head.

The hjjk-man regarded them in silence until they drew near. Then he said in a curiously incurious way, "Where are you going? You will meet your death out here."

"No," said Koshmar. "The winter is over."

"Be that as it may, you will die." The hjjk-man's voice was a dry rasping buzz, but it was not, Viggoran realized after a moment, a spoken sound. He was speaking within their minds: speaking with second sight, one might say. "Just beyond me in the valley your death is waiting. Go forward and see if I am lying."

And without another word he began to move past them, as if he had given the tribe all the time he felt it was worth.

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"Wait," Koshmar said. "Tell us what perils lie ahead, hjjk-man."

"You will see."

"Tell us now, or you will travel no further in this life."

Coolly the hjjk-man replied, "The rat-wolves are gathering in the valley. They will have your flesh, for you are flesh-folk, and they are very hungry. Let me pass."

"Wait a little longer," said Koshmar. "Tell me this: have you seen other humans in your crossing of the valley? Tribes like ours, emerging from their cocoons now that the springtime has come?"

The hjjk-man made a droning sound that might have been one of impatience: the first trace of emotion he had shown, Viggoran thought. "Why would I see humans?" the insect-creature asked. "This valley is not a place where one finds humans."

"You saw none at all? Not even a few?"

"You speak words without sense," said the hjjk-man. "I have no time for such discourse. I ask you now again to allow me to pass." Viggoran picked up an odd scent, suddenly, sweet and sharp. He saw droplets of a brown secretion beginning to appear on the hjjk-man's striped abdomen. That made him uneasy.

"We should let him go," he said softly to Koshmar. "He'll tell us nothing more. And he could be dangerous."

Koshmar fingered her spear. Harruel, just to her side, took that as a cue and hefted his own, running his hands up and down its shaft. "I'll kill him," Harruel muttered. "I'll put my spear right through his middle. Shall I, Koshmar?"

"No," she said. "That would be a mistake." She walked slowly around the hjjk-man, who appeared unperturbed by this turn of the discussion. "One last time," Koshmar said. "Tell me: are there no other tribes of humans in this region? It would give us great joy to find them. We have come forth to begin the world anew, and we seek our brothers and sisters."

"You will begin nothing anew, for the rat-wolves will slay you within an hour," replied the hjjk-man evenly. "And you are fools. There are no humans, flesh-woman. Now let me go on my way, or you will regret it."

Harruel brandished his spear. Koshmar shook her head. "Let him pass," she said. "Save your energies for the rat-wolves."

Viggoran watched in keen sorrow as the hjjk-man stalked away toward the hills out of which they had just come. He longed to sit down with the strange creature and speak with him of ancient times. Tell me what you know of the Great World, Viggoran would have said, and I will tell you all that is known to me! Let us talk of the cities of Thisthissima and Glorm, and of the Crystal Mountain and the Tower of Stars and the Tree of Life, and of all the glories past, of your race and mine and of the sleek sapphire-eyes folk who ruled the world, and of the other peoples also.

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And then let us speak of the swarms of falling stars whose great tails streamed in fire across the sky, and of the thunder of their impact as they struck the earth, and the clouds of flame and smoke that arose when they hit, and the winds and the black rain, and the chill that came over the land and the sea when the sun was blotted out by dust and soot. We can talk of the death of races, thought Viggoran—of the death of the Great World itself, whose equal will never be seen again. But the hjjk-man was nearly out of sight already, disappearing beyond the crest of the hills to the east. Viggoran shrugged. It was folly to think that the hjjk-man would have taken part in any such exchange of knowledge. In the time of the Great World it was said of them, so Viggoran understood, that they were beings who had not the slightest warmth, who knew nothing of friendship or kindness or love, who had, in fact, no souls. The long winter was not likely to have improved them in those regards, he suspected.

Hresh crept carefully around a wide shoulder of rock, looking about him to this side and that. He knew that what he was doing was rash. Night was coming on swiftly, now, and great jagged streaks of color made the western sky beautiful and frightful. Behind him everything had turned black already, a stunning all-engulfing darkness broken only by the dim flickering smoky flare of the campfire.

The tribe had camped that afternoon in what appeared to be the bed of a dry lake, scooped low below the valley floor. For everyone, no matter how young, there were tasks to do, of course. Some were sent off to gather twigs and scraps of dried grass for the fire, some set about herding the livestock into a close group, some joined Torlyri in chanting the guarding-rites to ward off menaces of the night. Hresh was one of the tinder-gatherers. Carrying a little wicker basket, he headed out into the territory just west and a little north of the campsite, foraging for anything that could be burned. There seemed to be very little in the immediate vicinity of the campsite. But Hresh did not mind venturing into the unknown.

He knew that he was getting very far from camp. Too far, perhaps. He could barely make out the sound of the chanting from here. But still he roamed on and on, through this mysterious chilly domain without walls or corridors, where the dark sky was an astounding open dome that went up beyond comprehension to the distant stars. He had to see everything. How else would he come to comprehend what the world was like? And seeing everything necessarily involved exposing himself to certain dangers. He was Hresh-full-of-questions, after all, and it was in the nature of Hresh-full-of-questions to seek answers, regardless of the risk. There is great merit, he thought, in having a soul as restless as mine. They did

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not understand that about him yet, because he was only a boy. But one day they would, Hresh vowed.

It seemed to him that he heard voices in the distance, borne toward him on the wind. Excitement surged in him. What if he were to find the campsite of another tribe just up ahead?

The thought made him giddy. Other tribes existed—so old Viggoran claimed—but nobody knew whether that was true. Hresh wanted to believe that it was: dozens or even hundreds of tribes, each in its own cocoon, waiting through generation after generation for the time of Coming Forth.

Yet there was no real evidence that there were any tribes other than the one that Koshmar ruled. Certainly there had never been any contact with one, at least not since the earliest days of the long winter. How could there be, when no one ever left the cocoon?

But now Koshmar's people were making their way in the open world. And there might well be other tribes out here too. To Hresh that was a fantastic notion. He had known only the same forty people all the eight years of his life. Now and then someone new was allowed to be born, at those times when someone old had reached the limit-age and was thrust outside the hatch to die—but otherwise it was just Koshmar and Torlyri and Harruel and Taniane and Minbain and Orbin and the rest, the same ones all the time. The idea of stumbling upon a band of completely other people was fantastic.

He tried to imagine what they would look like. Maybe some would have red eyes, or green fur. There might be men taller than Harruel. Their chieftain would not be a woman but a young boy. Why not? It was a different tribe, wasn't it? They would do everything differently. Instead of an old man they would have three old women, who kept the chronicles on sheets of grassglass and spoke in unison. Hresh laughed. They would have different names from ours, too. They will be called things like Miggwungus and Kik-kik-kik and Pinnipoppim, he decided. Another tribe! Incredible!

Hresh moved less cautiously now. In his eagerness to find the source of the voices ahead, he broke into a half-trot, jogging through the gathering darkness. Another tribe, yes! The voices grew more distinct. He pictured them sitting around a smouldering campfire just beyond the next clump of rocks. He saw himself stepping boldly into their midst. "I am Hresh of Koshmar's cocoon," he would say, "and my people are just over there. We mean to begin the world anew, for this is the great springtime!" And they would embrace him and give him velvetberry wine to drink, and they would say to him, "We too mean to begin the world anew. Take us to your chieftain!" And he would run back to camp, laughing and shouting, crying out that he had found other humans, a

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whole tribe of them, men and women and boys and girls, with names like Migg-wungus and Kik-kik-kik and—

Suddenly he halted, nostrils flaring, sensing-organ rigid and quivering. Something was wrong. In the stillness of the night he heard the sounds of the other tribe very clearly now. Very odd sounds they were, too, a high-pitched chittering sort of squeak mixed with a thick snuffling sort of noise—a peculiar sound, an ugly sound—

Not the sound of some other tribe, no.

Not human sounds at all.

Hresh sent forth his second sight, as Viggoran had taught him to do. For a moment everything was muddled and indistinct, but then he tuned his perceptions more carefully and things came into focus for him. There were a dozen creatures just on the far side of those rocks. Their bodies were about as long as a man's, but they moved on all fours. Their glaring red eyes were small and bright and fierce, their teeth were long and keen and protruded like daggers from their whiskery snouts, their hides were covered in dense gray fur, and their sensing-organs were held out straight behind them like long narrow whips, pink and almost hairless. Not human. Not at all. They were moving in a circle, round and round in a creepy shuffling way, pausing to raise their snouts and sniff. Hresh could not understand the language they were speaking, but the meaning of their words rode clearly to him on his second sight: *"Flesh—flesh—flesh—eat—eat—eat—eat flesh—"*

The rat-wolves are gathering in the valley, the hjjk-man had said. They will have your flesh, for you are flesh-folk, and they are very hungry. Koshmar had not seemed very alarmed by that. Perhaps she had thought that there were no such creatures as rat-wolves; or perhaps she had thought the hjjk-man was lying. But what else could these snuffling shuffling bright-eyed long-toothed things be, if not the rat-wolves of whom the hjjk-man had tried to warn them?

Hresh turned and ran.

Around the jutting fangs of rock, past the low sandy hummocks, down into the dry lake-bed—scrambling desperately in the dark, losing his basket of tinder in his haste, running as fast as he could back toward the campfire of the tribe. Strangenesses of the night assailed him. Something with wings and bulbous greenish-gold eyes buzzed about his head; he slapped it away and kept running. A hundred paces farther on, another something that looked like three long black ropes side by side rose up before him, coiling and swaying in the cold faint starlight. He darted to one side and did not look back.

Breathless, gasping, he rushed into the midst of camp.

"The rat-wolves!" he cried, pointing into the night. "The rat-wolves! I saw them!" And tumbled, exhausted, almost at the feet of Koshmar.

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He was afraid they would not believe him. He was only wild Hresh, troublesome Hresh, Hresh-full-of-questions, was he not? But for once they paid attention. "Where were they?" Koshmar demanded. "How many? How big?" Harruel was going about handing out spears to all but the children. Viggoran, squatting by the fire, aimed his sensing-organ out across the dry lake to read the rat-wolves' emanations.

"They're coming!" the old man called. "I feel them, heading this way!"

Koshmar, Torlyri, and Harruel, spears in hand, took up positions shoulder to shoulder at the western side of the camp. How magnificent they look, Hresh thought: the chieftain, the priestess, the great warrior. Nine more stood behind them, and then another row of nine, and the children and the childbearing women huddled in the middle. There was a long timeless time when nothing happened. Hresh began to wonder if he had dreamed the rat-wolves out there in the dark, and how severely Koshmar would punish him if this proved to be a false alarm.

But then abruptly the enemy was upon them. Hresh heard terrible high-pitched chittering cries, and smelled a strange loathsome musky smell; and an instant later the camp was invaded. They came bounding in from every side at once, screeching, leaping, snarling, snapping their teeth.

Women began to scream, and some of the men also. No one had ever seen animals like this, animals that lived on flesh and used their teeth as weapons. The wolf-pack circled round and round as if seeking to find the weaker members of the tribe and cut them off. By the flickering firelight Hresh saw their beady red eyes, their long naked sensing-organs, just as he had by second sight a little while before: what ugly things, what monsters! He shrank back toward the center of the group, wishing he had a spear. The huge figure of Harruel was outlined against the darkness, thrusting, grunting, thrusting again. And there was Torlyri valiantly holding one rat-wolf at bay with robust kicks while skewering another on the tip of her spear. Hresh heard dreadful howling sounds. The rat-wolves were calling to one another in what could only be a sort of a language: *"Kill—kill—kill—flesh—flesh—flesh—"* And someone human was moaning in pain; and someone else was uttering a low whimpering sound of fear.

Then, as swiftly as it had begun, the battle was over. Between one moment and the next all grew still. Harruel stood leaning on his spear, breathing hard, wiping at a runnel of blood that streamed from his thigh. Torlyri crouched on her knees, shivering in horror. Koshmar, clutching her spear at the ready, was looking about for more attackers, but there were none. Dead rat-wolves lay strewn all about.

"Is anyone hurt?" Koshmar asked. "Call out your names one by one, oldest first. Viggoran?"

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There was silence.

"Viggoran?" she repeated uneasily.

No answer came from Viggoran. "Look for him," Koshmar ordered Torlyri. "Konya?"

"Konya here."

"Staip."

"Harruel."

When it was Hresh's turn, he could barely speak, so amazed was he by all that had occurred. He managed only a hoarse whisper.

Everyone was accounted for, in the end, except two—three, actually, for one of the dead was Valmud, and she had been carrying an unborn. That was serious enough; but the other death was catastrophic. It was Hresh who found him, lying at the edge of the camp. Old Viggoran had defended himself well: he had strangled the wolf who had ripped out his throat, so it appeared. Hresh stared somberly at the dead man, stunned and numbed by the loss. He felt almost as if his own throat had been ripped out. A great vacant place in his soul could never now be filled. There was so much Hresh had wanted to learn from Viggoran about the world, and he would never learn it, now. Some things were in the chronicles, yes, but some had been passed down only by spoken words, from one chronicler to the next, and now those things were lost forever. Hresh knelt and touched the old man's forehead as if hoping that that knowledge would leap from Viggoran's spirit to his. But Viggoran's spirit was gone.

I will make myself chronicler in his place, Hresh told himself boldly, in that moment of grief and shock and intolerable loss.

And he resolved: I will go everywhere upon the face of this world and see everything and learn everything that can be learned, for I am Hresh-full-of-questions! And I will set it down in the chronicles for those who follow after us in the new springtime.

And, thinking those things, he felt the pain beginning to ebb.

All night long the whole tribe chanted the death-chants over their two fallen tribesfolk, and at dawn's first light they carried the bodies eastward a little way into the hills and said the words for them. Then Koshmar gave the signal, and they broke camp and headed out into the broad plains to the west. She would not say where they were going: only that it was the place where they were destined to go. No one dared to ask more.

It was the fifth week of the journey. Torlyri, rising at daybreak as always so that she could make the morning offering, rolled and stretched and clambered to her feet. The sun bathed her in a cheerful glow. She had begun to notice, in the past few days, that the weather seemed to be growing more agreeable. At first she had awakened stiff and shivering

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in a cold mist every day, but now the morning air seemed softer and milder.

It was a sign that stirred hope in her. Perhaps this really was the new springtime, after all.

Torlyri had never been certain of that. Like all the rest of the tribe she had allowed herself to be swept along out of the cocoon by Koshmar's insistent optimism. Out of love for Koshmar she had not voiced opposition, but Torlyri knew that there were some within the tribe who would have preferred to remain in the cocoon and take their chances with the ice-worms. Going forth was a tremendous step: an abandonment of a way of life that was hundreds of thousands of years old. They had emerged into a world of sudden dangers. Those ferocious snarling chittering rat-wolves: a lucky thing the tribe had had some warning of them, or they would have taken more lives than just two, that was certain. Then, a few days later, angry swarming winged creatures with furious blood-seeking beaks—what a task that had been, beating them off! The blood-birds had been followed by others even more vile, with leathery black wings tipped with savage horny claws. And after that—

There was no end to the monstrosities that lurked in these plains, Torlyri knew. And it was cold out here, and dishearteningly bleak, and there were no walls. *There were no walls.* The cocoon offered total security; here there was none at all. And what assurance did they have that it had not been too soon to come forth? True, it had been centuries since the last great cataclysm. But this might just be one of the quiet intervals between one death-star and the next. Sometimes, Viggoran had said, as many as five thousand years went by in peace, but that did not mean the long horror was over. Why, tomorrow or the next day or the day after that the fire of a death-star's tail might be seen streaming across the heavens, and then the whole world would shake with the force of the collision, and the sky would grow black and the sun would be hidden and all warmth would flee and all warmth-loving creatures would perish. That had happened so often before, in the seven hundred thousand years of the long winter: how could they be sure it would not happen again? The tribe owed it to humanity to preserve itself until the nightmare was finally over.

It is possible that we are the only ones left at all, Torlyri thought.

The idea was frightening. Just one fragile little band of forty men and women and children standing between humankind and extinction—can we dare take any risk of destruction, she wondered, if we are the sole remnant of mankind? It was as though they bore the burden of all the millions of years of mankind's stay upon the earth: everything coming down to this one little band, these few frail stragglers wandering the bleak plains. And that was terrifying.

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Still, the days *were* growing warmer. It would be folly for the tribe to hide in its cocoon until the end of time, waiting for absolute knowledge that it was safe to emerge. Koshmar believed it was safe. The omens told her so. And Koshmar was the chieftain.

Torlyri, going quietly out of the camp where everyone still lay sleeping, found a place for her offering a little way to the west. It seemed a holy place: a sheltered declivity where thousands of small red-backed insects were industriously building a turreted castle out of the sandy earth. She knelt beside it, said the words, prepared her offering.

She had had to invent a new rite since the Coming Forth. No more the daily interchange of things from within the cocoon and things from without. Instead, now she filled a bowl with bits of grass and soil from whatever place they happened to have spent the night, and in the morning she waved it toward the four corners of the sky and invoked the protection of the gods, and then she carried that bowl's contents onward to empty it the following morning at the next campsite. That way Torlyri constructed a continuity of sacredness as they made their way across the face of this unfamiliar world.

Creating that continuity seemed vital to her. With Viggoran dead, it was as though the whole past had been lopped away, and they were without ancestors or heritage now. With their yesterdays so cruelly severed from them, they must build a new skein of history stretching into the years to come.

When Torlyri was done with that morning's rite, she rose to return to camp. Something moved beneath her feet, in the earth. She looked down, scuffed at the sandy ground, felt it quiver in response to her probing. Putting down her bowl, she brushed away the surface soil and exposed what looked like a thick glossy pink cord buried a short distance underneath. It wriggled in a convulsive way as if annoyed. Gingerly she touched a fingertip to it, and it wriggled again, so vigorously that two arm's-lengths of it burst free of the ground and arched into the air like a straining cable. The head and the tail of the thing remained hidden: Torlyri wondered how much there was of it.

"What a nasty worm!" came a voice from above. "Kill it, Torlyri!"

She looked up. Koshmar stood at the top of the slope.

"Why are you here?" Torlyri asked.

"Because I didn't want to be there," Koshmar said, smiling in an oddly self-conscious way.

Torlyri understood. There was no mistaking that smile. Koshmar must want to twine, something that they had not done since leaving the cocoon. In the cocoon there had been twining-chambers for such intimacies; here no privacy was to be found under the great bowl of the sky. So Koshmar had followed Torlyri to the offering-place. Warmly Torlyri extended a

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hand to her twining-partner, and Koshmar scrambled down the slope beside her.

The creature was still writhing. Koshmar drew her knife. "If you won't kill it, I will," she said.

"No," Torlyri said.

"*No?* Why not?"

"It hasn't harmed us. We don't know what it is. Why don't we just let it be, and go somewhere else?"

"Because I hate it. It's a hideous thing."

Torlyri stared strangely at her. "I've never heard you talk that way before. Killing for the mere sake of killing, Koshmar? That isn't like you. Let it be. All right? Let it be." Something was troubling Koshmar deeply, that was clear. Torlyri sought to divert her. "Look over here, at the castle these insects have built."

Indifferently Koshmar said, "How amazing."

"It is! Look, they've made a little gate, and windows and passageways, and down here—"

"Yes, it's wonderful," said Koshmar without looking. She put her knife away: evidently she had lost interest in the cable-creature also. "Twine with me, Torlyri," she said.

"Of course. Right here, do you think?"

"Right here. Now. It's been a million years."

"Yes. Yes, of course."

Tenderly Torlyri brushed her hand against her partner's cheek and they lay down together. Their sensing-organs touched, withdrew, touched again. Then gently they wound their sensing-organs one about the other in the delicate and intricate movements of the twining, and entered into the first stages of their joining. Torlyri felt how tense Koshmar was, how rigid. She opened herself to Koshmar and as their souls merged she strove to take from Koshmar whatever dark troublesome thing had invaded her soul.

It was a communion far more intimate than mere coupling, which was an act that Koshmar had always scorned and Torlyri had tried two or three times over the years without finding much reward in it. Most members of the tribe coupled rarely, for coupling led to breeding, and breeding was necessarily a rare event, since the need for replacement of tribesfolk was so infrequent in the cocoon. But twining—ah, twining, that was something else!

Afterward they lay close together, warm, fulfilled.

"Is it gone from you now?" Torlyri asked. "The shadow, the cloud that was on you?"

"I think it is."

"What was it? Will you tell me?"

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Koshmar was silent for a while. Then, digging her fingers lightly into Torlyri's dense black fur, she replied as if from a great distance, "Do you remember what the hjjk-man said, his last words to us? *There are no humans, flesh-woman*, is what he said."

"I remember that, yes."

"It remains in my mind, and it burns me, Torlyri. What could he have meant by that?"

"He was speaking mere idle mischief. He wished to trouble our souls, that's all. He was impatient, he was bothered because we weren't letting him pass. So he said something that he hoped would hurt us. It was only a lie."

"He spoke the truth about the rat-wolves," Koshmar pointed out.

"Even so. That doesn't mean that anything else he said was true."

"But what if it was? What if we're the only ones, Torlyri?"

Koshmar's chilling words echoed Torlyri's own baleful speculations of a little while before. Somberly she declared, "The same thought has occurred to me, Koshmar. And also the thought of the responsibility that lies upon us to survive, if we forty are the only humans left in the world. If all the others perished in the hardships of the long winter."

"The responsibility, yes."

"How heavily it must weigh on you, Koshmar!"

"But I am less troubled now. I feel stronger, now that we have twined, Torlyri." Koshmar laughed. "Perhaps all I needed was to twine, eh? There was such deep gloom in my spirit, such foreboding, such a sense of the terrible consequences of folly—and I knew that I alone bore the burden, that it was by my decision that we had come forth from the cocoon—" She shook her head. "As always you've cheered me by sharing your strength with me. The hjjk-man lied. We are not the only ones; and we will find the others and together we will rebuild the world. Is that not so? Who could doubt it? Ah, Torlyri, Torlyri, how much I love you!"

And she embraced Torlyri joyously. But Torlyri could not respond. She was lost now in doubts and despairs that had passed to her from her twining-partner in their communion.

"Is *your* soul darkened now?" Koshmar asked.

"Perhaps it is."

"I won't allow it. Have you raised up my soul at the expense of your own?"

"If I've taken your fears from you, it pleases me greatly," said Torlyri. "But now the fears that troubled you lie heavy on me. What if we *are* the only humans, Koshmar?"

"What if we are?" said Koshmar grandly. "Then we will inherit the earth, we forty! We will make it our kingdom. We will repeople it with

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our kind. We must be very wary, that is all, for we are a rare precious thing, if we are the only humans there are."

Koshmar's buoyance was irresistible. Torlyri felt the dark moment beginning to lift from her.

"Still," Koshmar went on, "it is the same either way, whether we are the only humans or just a few out of millions. We must always go warily, past all the perils this world holds for us. For above all else we must guard and preserve one another, and—"

"Oh, look—look, Koshmar!" Torlyri cried suddenly.

She pointed to the insect-castle. The cable-creature had yanked itself completely free of the ground at one end—it was enormously long, three or four times the length of a man—and, looping high and swooping down, it was striking again and again at the structure. Its featureless, eyeless face ended in a gaping maw; and it was devouring the insects, castle and all, in a series of voracious gulps.

Koshmar shivered. "Yes: perils on all sides. I told you I wanted to kill it."

"But it had not harmed you."

"And the insects whose castle it has destroyed?"

Torlyri smiled. "You owe them no favors, Koshmar. Every creature must eat, even nasty cable-things. Come, let it finish its breakfast in peace."

"There are times I think you are less gentle than you seem, Torlyri."

"Every creature must eat," said Torlyri once more.

Hresh needed all the courage he could find in order to go to Koshmar and ask to be made chronicler in Viggoran's place. It was not so much that he feared being refused: it was being mocked that he dreaded. Koshmar could be cruel; Koshmar could be harsh. And Hresh knew that she already had cause to dislike him.

But to his surprise the chieftain received his outrageous request amiably. "Chronicler, you say? That's a task that usually goes to the oldest man of the tribe, is it not? And you are—"

"I will be nine soon," he said staunchly.

"Nine. Something short of oldest."

"Why does it matter, Koshmar? Everything is different for us out here. There are dangers. All the men must be on constant patrol. We have had the rat-wolves, the blood-birds, the sand-devils, the horn-wings, almost every day some new creature to fend off. I'm too small to fight well yet. But I can keep the chronicles."

"Are you sure of that? Can you read?"

"Viggoran taught me. I can write words and I can read them. And I can remember things, too. I have much of the chronicles by memory,

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already. Try me on anything. The coming of the death-stars, the building of the cocoons—"

"You've read the chronicles?" Koshmar asked, amazed.

Hresh felt his face grow hot. What a blunder! The chronicles were sealed; no one was permitted to open the chest that contained them except the chronicler himself; indeed, Hresh had managed sometimes to study a few pages that Viggoran had happened to leave open, for the old man had been indulgent. But in truth he had done most of his investigations of history surreptitiously, since the beginning of the march, while the older tribesfolk had been out foraging for food. The baggage was often left unguarded; no one seemed to notice the boy slipping open the sacred casket.

Lamely he said, "Viggoran let me see them. He made me promise never to say anything to anyone, but once in a while he would—"

Koshmar laughed. "He did, did he? Does no one keep oaths in this tribe?"

"He loved to tell the old stories. And I was more interested than anyone else, so he—he and I—"

"Yes. Yes, I can see that. Well, it matters very little now what oaths were kept or broken in the time before we came forth." Koshmar looked down at him from what seemed like an enormous height. "Chronicler, then? And not even nine? Go, get the books, then. Let me see how you write, and then we'll decide. Go, now!"

Hresh rushed off, heart pounding. Chronicler! She was going to give it to him! He would be the old man, and not even nine!

This day Threyne was in charge of the sacred things. Hresh pounced upon her, crying out that Koshmar had told him to fetch the holy books. She was skeptical of that, and would not give them to him; and in the end they went together to the chieftain.

"Yes," said Koshmar. "I meant to let him bring the books." Threyne stared at her in astonishment. But she would not defy Koshmar. Muttering, she yielded them to Hresh.

"Very well," Koshmar said. "Open to the last page, and write what I tell you. *'It was decided then by Koshmar the chieftain that the tribe would seek Vengiboneeza the great city of the sapphire-eyes, for it might be possible there to find secret things that would be of value in the repeopling of the world.'* Go on, write that down."

Hresh pressed the pads of his fingers to the page, and concentrated the full force of his mind, and sent the thought hurtling onto the sensitive sheet. And to his wonderment characters began to appear, dark brown against the pale yellow background. Writing! Not as fine as Viggoran's, no, but it was good enough, clear and comprehensible.

"Let me see," Koshmar said. She leaned close, nodding. "Ah. Ah, yes.

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You do have it, do you not? Little mischief-maker, little question-asker: you truly can write! Ah. Ah." She pursed her lips and gripped the edges of the page tightly and narrowed her eyes, and murmured, after a moment, *'So Koshmar the chieftain decided that the tribe would search for the great city Vengiboneeza of the sapphire-eyes—'* "

It was close, but those were not quite the words Hresh had written. How could that be? Was it possible that the chieftain was unable to read, that she was quoting from the memory of what she had dictated? That was a startling thing, but after a bit of thought Hresh saw that it was not so surprising.

A chieftain did not need to know reading. A chronicler did.

A moment later Hresh realized a second startling thing, which was that he had just been permitted to learn the identity of the goal toward which they had marched all these months. Until this moment Koshmar had been steadfast in her refusal to divulge it to anyone; but now he alone shared the secret. Vengiboneeza! They would search for the most famous city of the Great World! I should have guessed it, Hresh thought, chagrined; for he had seen what it said in the chronicles, that at winter's end humans would go to the sapphire-eyes' capital and find there the things they needed to rule the world. Koshmar must have seen that too; or, rather, Viggoran must have told her of it. Vengiboneeza! Truly life has become a dream, Hresh thought.

"Am I then the chronicler?" he asked.

"You are the chronicler, yes," said Koshmar.

So that was how it happened. He came to the chieftain every few days and she told him things, and he wrote them in the vast book. And at other times he burrowed into the sacred volumes simply to learn what was there. He reveled in the treasure of history. He went back to the oldest books, which he could barely understand, since they were written in a strange kind of writing; but he ran his trembling fingertips over the stiff pages and the sense came up out of them after a while. Fragmentary accounts of the Great World is what they were: tales of how the six races had lived in harmony on the earth, humans and hjjk-folk and vegetals and mechanicals and sea-lords and sapphire-eyes. It must have been an astounding epoch. And then he skipped forward to the tragic end of it, when the death-stars began to fall, as had been foretold for so long. That was when the sapphire-eyes perished, for their blood was cold and they could not abide freezing weather, and the vegetals died also, having been made out of plant cells and being unable to bear the frost. He read the noble account of the voluntary death of the mechanicals, who had not wanted to survive into the new era, though that would have been possible for them. He read it all, swallowing it down in great gulps.

Naturally Hresh was supposed to keep everything that Koshmar dic-

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tated a secret until she was ready to divulge it. But he was, after all, not quite nine years old. And so one day soon after he had become chronicler when he was with Taniane, he said to her, "Do you know where we're heading?"

"No one knows that but Koshmar."

"I know it."

"You do?"

"And I'll tell you, if you keep it a secret. We're going to Vengiboneeza. Can you believe it? *Vengiboneeza*, Taniane!"

He thought the revelation would stun her. But it drew nothing from her but a blank look.

"Where?" she asked.

They marched west, on and on. Never once did they encounter other humans. Koshmar was of more than one mind about that. In part she would have liked to meet some other tribe in order to have confirmation that she had not done something foolish in leading her people out of the cocoon; and in part she wished to be free of the uncomfortable possibility that her forty souls were all that was left of the human race; and in part she simply was eager to join with another band of wanderers with whom they could share the risks and hardships of the journey.

But at the same time the idea of finding others made her uncomfortable. She had long been the master, absolute and unchallenged. If they met another tribe there might well be rivalries, disagreements, even warfare. Koshmar had no desire to share her power with some other chieftain. To some degree, she realized, she *wanted* her people to be the only humans who had managed to survive the downfall of the Great World. That way—if all went well—she would go down in the chronicles as one of the greatest leaders in history, the one who singlehandedly had engineered the revival of the human race. That was vanity, yes, she knew. Yet surely it was not an unpardonable sin to have such ambitions.

Still, the responsibilities were heavy. They were heading through a perilous land toward an unknown destination. Each day brought something new and troublesome to tax the tribe's resolve, and often Koshmar herself felt uncertain of her course. But those doubts had to be hidden from her people.

It rained for ten days and ten nights, until everyone was sodden and reeking from the wetness. There were those who said that a new deathstar had struck the earth far away, too far away for the impact to be heard, and that this was the beginning of yet another time of darkness and cold. "No," said Koshmar vehemently. "This is only something that happens in this particular place. Do you see how thick the grass is here,

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how heavy the foliage?" They went on, sodden and reeking of damp fur. And after a time the rain stopped.

Then the days began to grow shorter. Ever since they had left the cocoon, each day had been longer than the one before it; but now, beyond any dispute, the sun could be seen to drop below the horizon earlier and earlier every afternoon.

"I think we are entering a land of eternal night," said Staip. "A dark land will be a cold land."

"And a dead one," Konya said. "Nothing can survive in such a place. We should turn back."

"We must go onward," insisted Koshmar. "What is happening now is normal and natural. We have entered a place where the darkness is stronger than the light; beyond it things will change again for the better." And they went on.

But privately she was not so sure that her confidence was justified. In the cocoon the day and the night had been of identical lengths. Out here things were plainly different. But what did it really mean, this dwindling of the hours of daylight? Perhaps Staip was right and they were marching into a realm where the sun never rose and they would meet their death of freezing. She wished she could consult Viggoran; but she had no Viggoran now, and her old man was a child. She sent for him anyway, and, taking care not to let him see how baffled she was, said to Hresh, "I need to know an ancient name, chronicler."

"And what name is that?" the boy asked.

"The name that the ancients gave to the changing of the times of light and dark. It must be in the chronicles. The name is the god: we must call the god by his rightful name in our prayers, or the sunlight will never return."

Hresh went off to consult the archives. Three days later he returned and said, "It is called the seasons. There is the season of daylight and it is followed by the season of darkness and then the daylight season comes round again."

"Of course," said Koshmar. "The seasons. How could I have forgotten the word?" And she summoned Torlyri and ordered her to pray to the god of seasons. Though the days continued to grow shorter, Koshmar would hear no further discussion of the phenomenon. "It is the seasons," she said, waving her hand imperiously. "Everyone knows that! What is there to fear? The seasons are natural. The seasons are normal."

The land was changing too. It was flat for a long while; then it became broken and wild, with ridges of blazing scarlet rock that were as sharp as knives along their summits. Just on the far side they found a strange sight: a dead thing of metal, twice as wide as a man but not half as tall, standing by itself on a bare stony slope. Its head was a broad one-eyed

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dome, its legs were elaborately jointed. Once it must have had a thick, gleaming metal skin, but now it was rusted and pitted by the rains of an uncountable number of years. "It is a mechanical," Hresh announced, after studying his books. "This must be where they came to die." And indeed in the lowlands a little way beyond there were many more, hundreds, thousands of the squat metal creatures, each standing upright in a little zone of solitude, a private empire. All were dead and rusting. They were so corroded that they dissolved at a touch, and toppled into a scattering of dust. "In the time of the Great World," said Hresh solemnly, "these creatures lived in the mighty cities of great kingdoms where everyone was a machine. But they did not care to go on living once the death-stars began to fall." Koshmar prowled among them, thinking that she might find one that still had life enough in it to tell her how to reach the city of Vengiboneeza; but their blank dead faces mocked her with silence. They were dead beyond hope of awakening, every one of them.

After that there was a sandy wasteland where nothing would grow, not even a tuft of grass, and then came chains of lakes and a turbulent river which they crossed on rafts of light wood bound by the bark of a creature that seemed half serpent, half tree. Beyond the river was a range of low mountains. One day during the crossing of that range keen-sighted Torlyri had a glimpse of a huge band of hjjk-folk far away, a whole enormous horde of them, marching toward the south. By the coppery glint of twilight they looked no larger than ants as they made their way along a rocky defile; but there must have been thousands of them, a terrifying multitude. If they noticed Koshmar's little band they gave no sign of it, however, and soon the insect-people were lost to view beyond the folds of the mountains.

The days grew longer again. The air became warmer. Koshmar felt vindicated. The god of seasons smiled upon her.

But where was great Vengiboneeza? Koshmar was convinced that the lost capital of the sapphire-eyes held the secrets that would enable her to rule the reborn world. According to the chronicles, it was in the place where the sun goes to rest; but where was that? In the west, surely. Yet each night they were many weary leagues farther westward, and when the sun vanished at the end of day beyond the edge of the world it was evident that all their marching had brought them no closer to its resting-place.

"Search the books again," she said despairingly to Hresh. "There is some passage you have failed to find that will tell us how to reach Vengiboneeza."

He ran his hands again and again over the pages. But there was nothing, he said: the writers of the chronicles had not seen any need to

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set down the location of that great city, so famous had it been. Koshmar felt the beginning of defeat. If only Viggoran were here to guide her! But her chronicler was a boy. He was quick and eager, but he lacked Viggoran's depth of wisdom and familiarity with all the ages that had gone before. She could not hope to sustain the trek much longer. There had been four deaths, now: Viggoran and Valmud slain by rat-wolves, the young man Hignord carried off in darkness by something on many legs, and just the other day the girl Tramassilu, speared by a lunatic hopping-thing with a long green beak. The bellies of the breeding pairs were swelling with replacements for them, but in the outside world deaths happened far more swiftly than births, and a few more seasons like this and their numbers would be dangerously low. Already there were those, she knew, who said they were marching to no purpose. Harruel was the leader of that faction. Let us settle down in some good fertile place and build us a village, he was saying behind Koshmar's back. Torlyri had overheard him. In the cocoon it was unthinkable that the tribe would have countermanded a chieftain's word, but they were no longer in the cocoon now. Koshmar began to imagine herself cast down from power: not the savior of the reborn world but merely an overthrown chieftain.

She turned to Hresh. With him, though with no one else, she had ceased to pretend that she was following the clear mandate of the gods.

"What can we do?" she asked.

"We must ask for help," the boy replied.

"Of whom?"

"Why, of the creatures we meet as we go along."

Koshmar was skeptical. But anything was worth trying; and so whenever they encountered some being that seemed to have a mind, no matter how simple, she would have it seized and would soothe it until it grew calm and theN, by second sight and sensing-organ contact, she would strive to get froM it the knowledge she needed. The first was an odd round fleshy creature, a head with no body and a dozen plump little legs. Vivid ripplings of excitement ran through it when Koshmar plumbed its mind for images of Vengiboneeza, but that was all that was forthcoming. From a trio of gawky stilt-legged blue furry things that seemed to share a single mind came, when they were asked about cities in the west, a pattern of thought that was like an intense buzzing and snorting. And a hideous hook-clawed forest creature, all mouth and foul-smelling orange hair, gave a wild raucous laugh and flashed the image of lofty towers wrapped in strangling vines. Such interchanges had their moments of fascination, Koshmar thought, but they were yielding very little of any real use.

The deepest pessimism invaded Koshmar's soul.

Then, as the tribe was going around the rim of a huge black lake in

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the midst of a zone of boggy land, the dark waters stirred and boiled wildly and from the depths there began slowly to rise a bizarre colossus, a thing of enormous height but such flimsy construction that it seemed a gust of wind could shatter it—limbs that were no more than thin struts, a body that was only a filmy tube interminably extended. Koshmar threw her arm across her face in astonishment, and Harruel brandished his spear, and some of the more timid members of her tribe began to flee; but Hresh, holding his ground, called out, "This must be one of the water-strider folk. It is harmless, I think."

Up and up it rose, erupting from the lake to a height ten or fifteen times that of the tallest man. There it hovered, looming far above them, balancing with wide-splayed feet on the surface of the water, which it seemed barely to disturb. It peered down out of a row of glaring green-gold eyes, surveying them in a melancholy way.

"You! Water-strider!" Hresh called out. "Tell us how to find the city of the sapphire-eyes!"

And, amazingly, the huge creature replied at once in the silent speech of the mind, saying, "Why, it lies just two lakes and a stream from here, in the sunset direction. Everyone knows that! But what good will it do you to go there?" The water-strider laughed and began to fold itself, section upon section, down toward the lake. "What good? What good? What good?" It laughed again; and then it disappeared beneath the black water.

Hresh, slipping ahead of the tribe in his eagerness, had the first glimpse of the towers four days later. They soared like great slabs of shinestone above the jungle, and there were more of them than he could count, row upon row, this one an iridescent violet hue, this one a burning gold, this

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one scarlet rimmed with balconies of midnight blue, this one utter jet. Heart pounding, he hurried back toward the others, crying out, "Vengiboneeza! I've found Vengiboneeza!" Then something thick and furry and incredibly strong snared him around the throat and hurled him to the ground.

He was choking. His eyes were beginning to bulge from their sockets. Everything was a blur. He could barely make out his assailants. There were three of them, it appeared. Two were jumping up and down and the third held Hresh prisoner with his long, ropy sensing-organ. If they were human, they belonged to some very different tribe, Hresh thought: their arms and legs were extraordinarily long, their bodies were thin, their heads were small, with hard gleaming eyes. They were covered all over by soft long grayish-green fur.

"I—can't breathe," Hresh muttered. "Please—"

He heard mocking laughter and a babble of sounds in an unknown language, shrill and turbulent. Desperately he tugged at the sensing-organ, digging his fingertips in hard. Strangely, that produced no response, except perhaps a tighter grip. Hresh had never known of a sensing-organ so insensitive: the other seemed hardly to feel a thing.

"Please—please—" he said feebly, with what he knew to be his last breath.

There was a sudden screeching sound. The pressure at his throat relented and he rolled free, doubling over, gasping and gagging. When he had begun to recover he looked up. Harruel and Konya stood above him. They had speared two of the three strangers; the third had fled into the trees and dangled there from its sensing-organ, screaming at them.

"Are you all right?" Harruel asked.

"I think so. Just—out—of—breath. But the city—the city—" He pointed

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with a trembling hand. "Vengiboneeza!"

Vengiboneeza, yes. Koshmar came running, and Torlyri, and then most of the others. Hresh, though still shaky, led them through the tangles of vines and saw-edged grasses to the place where the shining towers pierced the sky. But the chattering gray-green folk were everywhere, scrambling in the trees, dangling by their sensing-organs, leaping from bough to bough, calling out defiance.

"What tribe is this?" Torlyri asked.

"A very stupid one, I think," said Hresh. "But they move swiftly."

"Not so swiftly that we can't drive them off," Koshmar said. "They're nothing but vermin! The city will be ours. Spears, everyone! Torches! On to Vengiboneeza!"

Vermin they might be, and stupid vermin also, yet the strange tribe proved troublesome. They would not descend from the trees, but pelted Koshmar's people with fruit and branches and even their own dung, crying out incomprehensible insults all the while. But Koshmar and her warriors advanced steadily, using spears, throwing-sticks, darts, and the rest of their weapons; and gradually the other tribe retreated. Hresh, watching the battle from a safe place, was dismayed and horrified by the forest-folk. How ugly they were, how debased, how—inhuman! They seemed like mere animals. They were terrified by the torches, as if they had never seen fire before. They used their sensing-organ simply as a tail, like any trivial creature, as though it had no powers at all except that of allowing them to swing through the treetops. But all the same they look not very different from us, Hresh thought. That was the worst part. We are human, they are beasts; and we are so close! There but for the grace of the gods go we!

In half an hour the battle was over. The forest-chatterers were gone; the way to Vengiboneeza lay open.

"Let me go in first," Hresh begged. "I found it! I want to be first!"

Koshmar, chuckling, nodded. "Hresh-full-of-questions," she said amiably. "Yes. Go."

Suddenly awed, Hresh slipped through the massive gate, and stood at the threshold to Vengiboneeza. To his astonishment, three of the sapphire-eyes folk waited just within: massive figures, standing upright on great thick-thighed legs, supported by heavy sensing-organs—or were they simply tails?—and holding their small forearms outstretched in a gesture that seemed plainly to be one of invitation. Their huge heavy-lidded eyes were radiant with wisdom and power. Twice these beings had ruled the world: once in the ancientmost times, before any humans had even existed, in a long-ago civilization that an earlier onslaught of death-stars had destroyed; and then again late in the human era, when the few survivors of that first lost sapphire-eyes empire had brought

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themselves back to greatness a second time. Reptiles by ancestry, of crocodilian stock, descended from creatures that had been content to lie torpid in the mud of tropical rivers, and had managed to rise far above that level; but the return of the death-stars had destroyed the sapphire-eyes' realm once again, and this time there had been no survivors in that new terrible cold.

"No," Hresh whispered. "You can't exist. You all died with the Great World!"

"How could we have died, little monkey, when we were never alive?" said the sapphire-eyes on the left.

"Never alive?"

"Only machines," said the one on the right.

"Placed here to welcome human beings at winter's end into the city of our masters, in whose image we were made," said the center sapphire-eyes.

"Machines," said Hresh. "In the image of your masters. Who died in the long winter. I see. I see. We can go into the city, then? You'll show us all that it holds?" He was trembling with awe. He had never seen anything so majestic as these three. And yet all they were were clever artificials of some sort, he realized. No more alive than—than—

Then he said, after a moment, "Why did you call me 'little monkey'? Don't you recognize a human being when you see one?"

The sapphire-eyes made a strange hissing sound, which Hresh felt to be laughter.

"But you *are* a little monkey," said the center sapphire-eyes. "And those are larger monkeys, standing behind you. And it was monkeys of a different and simpler kind that attacked you in the forest."

Hresh realized that Koshmar and Torlyri and the rest had come up behind him and were watching this exchange in silence.

"*They* were monkeys, perhaps. We are human beings," said Hresh firmly.

"Ah, no," said the left-hand sapphire-eyes, and made the little hissing sound again. "Not human, no. The humans departed long ago, at the outset of the long winter. You are only their distant cousins, do you see, both you and the forest folk, though I will grant that you are far superior to the forest-folk in matters of the mind. You are not made from human stock, but of something simpler, something of a different line of descent from that ancestor of humans and monkeys both: a second attempt, perhaps, at achieving what was achieved with humans. You are somewhat like the humans, but not very much so. I assure you of that. They had no hair on their bodies, the humans, they had no tails, they—"

"This isn't a tail!" cried Hresh, with indignation. "It's a sensing-organ!"

"A modified tail, yes," the sapphire-eyes went on. "It is quite good, it

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is truly remarkable. But you are not human. There are no longer humans here. You are monkeys, or the children of monkeys. The humans are gone from the earth."

"Not—human?" Hresh said, close to tears. "Not—human?"

"What is this?" Koshmar burst in, at last. "Who are these creatures? Sapphire-eyes, are they? And still alive?"

"No," said Hresh. "Only artificials in the form of sapphire-eyes, guardians of the gate of Vengiboneeza. But did you hear what they said? That we aren't human, that we're only monkeys, or descended from monkeys, that our sensing-organs are just monkey-tails, that the humans are gone—"

"We are humans," said Koshmar quietly.

"Even though they say—"

"We are humans," Koshmar repeated, and there was something terrible and awesome in the way she said it. "Let no creature, living or artificial, deny it."

"The humans are gone, they say," Hresh murmured. "They had no tails—no sensing-organs—they were without fur—"

"That is some other kind of human," said Koshmar. "That kind of human is gone, yes. But we are here. And we are human, by right of blood, by right of succession. It is the truth." She came forward and faced the three hulking reptiles just within the gate. "What do you say, sapphire-eyes? Are we not the humans now? Humans of a new kind, perhaps, humans of a better kind: for they are gone, and we are here. We have endured, where they have not. We have survived to winter's end, and now we will take back the world from the hjjk-men. What do you say, sapphire-eyes? Are we not humans? May we not enter great Vengiboneeza? What do you say?"

There was a long aching silence.

"We are the humans now," Koshmar declared again, unwaveringly. "Admit it! Admit it! Humans by right of succession. Where are they? We are here! I tell you, we are the humans now."

There was silence again, mighty and profound. Hresh thought he had never seen Koshmar look more majestic.

"So be it," said one of the sapphire-eyes, finally, just as it seemed the air itself would crack and split apart under the strain. "You are the humans now." And the creature appeared to smile.

Then the three great reptilian forms bowed and moved aside. They had yielded, thought Hresh in joy and astonishment. They had yielded! And Koshmar the chieftain, holding her sensing-organ aloft like a scepter, led her little band of humans through the gate and toward the shining towers of Vengiboneeza. ●

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Arnold Hendrick has long been one of the great "lost boys" of gaming. Now he might not think of himself as lost, or even mildly misplaced, but bear with me, and I'll explain why some of us have been searching for him.

The year that I became really active in gaming, in 1982, the same year I spent a summer taking care of my dying father, I discovered games. To pass the time between visits to my father in his Florida hospital (so obviously crawling with greedy "specialists" nailing down every bit of Medicare money that walked in the door), I picked up some games from the Compleat Strategist in Davie, Florida. (The store is easy to miss. One wrong turn and you're faced with rows of discount cigarette stores run by the Seminole Indians.)

And one of the games suggested to me as a good solitaire game was *Barbarian Prince* designed by Arnold Hendrick. *Prince* was a solo board game featuring the adventures of Kal Arath as he attempts to regain his throne. A deft, unique mixture of the now-famous paragraph system ("You're in a dark hole. To your left . . .") and real board game elements, *Barbarian Prince* was a compulsively addicting, really-tough adventure game.

Released by Dwarfstar Games, a division of Heritage USA, *Barbarian Prince* was about the size of a Cracker Jack box (and it even came with a prize—a lead metal figure of the Prince). The game went on to win the Charles Roberts GAMA Award for that year. And then the incredible happened.

Dwarfstar Games went belly-up, and *Barbarian Prince* disappeared. One of the best games ever, and it was gone. Rumors, and then, later reports of a new company issuing the game popped up. But then stories of lost art circulated and *Barbarian Prince* has remained out of print.

Arnold Hendrick appeared to land on his feet, though. It was reported he went on to work for Coleco, just as the video game mania was reaching its height. But he appeared lost to the world of board games and I often wondered whether he'd ever turn up again.

Recently I received a copy of Microprose's computer game *Pirates!* (Microprose Simulation Software, 120 Lakefront Drive, Hunt Valley, MD 21030). Microprose's normal output tends to jet and copter simulation games, and *Pirates!*

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seemed to be somewhat of a departure. (With more to come, I'm told. Microprose is currently working on a space simulation.)

It was designed by Sid Meier, creator of *Silent Service*, and I popped it in with no real expectation of playing anything special. And there I was wrong. One page, yes, just one page out of a ninety page rule book, was all that I needed to start playing the game.

And what a game. There were duels (with a choice of rapier, long sword, or cutlass), broadside battles with barques and sloops, and tricky navigation between nasty coral reefs and the tropical islands of the Spanish Main. Forts could be attacked by land or sea, towns explored, and beaches scoured for treasure. It was while holding the atmospheric map of the Spanish Main that comes with the game that I noticed the name "Arnold Hendrick." He was credited with scenario design and documentation, as well as assisting with the map, and Hendrick's touch in the game seemed clear.

Hendrick seemed to have helped supply the indefinable quality of fun and purpose that fills *Pirates!*. It's not just a game of battles, plunder, and divvying up the loot. There's a real sense of a saga here, of a large-scale adventure.

Once, when my pirate had advanced to journeyman level, I had to search for my lost sister, tracking another pirate, Don Diego, until he yielded fragments of a map showing where she might be. With careful study of the map, I began to search the islands for my sister.

But the game allows you to engage in "Famous Expeditions." You can play Francis Drake, circa 1573, or Henry Morgan as he sacks Panama. You can become Piet Heyn and try to intercept the Spanish treasure galleons off the coast of Havana.

As realistic as this seems, it's still very much a romanticized, fantasy view of pirates (and the game is completely playable with a joy stick). But the adventure suggested in the game play, especially the ship-to-ship battles, is vivid. Game designer Sid Meier has done a remarkable job.

But Arnold Hendrick's scenarios, the sense of purposeful high adventure, raises *Pirates!* to classic level. *Pirates!* is tremendous fun and could easily be the best game of the year.

Now, if someone would only reissue *Barbarian Prince*. ●

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

EMPEROR OF EVERYTHING

Don't stop me if you've read this one before, because if you do about half the science fiction and about two-thirds of the fantasy on the racks will disappear in a flash of ectoplasm.

Our story begins out on the edge of civilization where a seemingly ordinary youth is undergoing the alienated travails of adolescent angst. Unbeknownst to the bumpkins around him (and perhaps to himself), he is in fact the exiled rightful heir to the throne of Empire, or a closet mutant superman, or possessed of dormant magical powers, or one hell of a cyberwizard, or maybe just a natural .400 hitter with the double-edged broadsword.

But the Dark Forces are ascendant, a climactic Armageddon between Good and Evil is abuilding, and our hero in hiding is destined by genes or bloodline or plotline imperatives to become the champion of the Armies of the Light. Sinister characters are sniffing around Podunk after him, and maybe come close to snuffing him by the end of chapter one.

Long about now, a stranger from the central worlds shows up, possessed of advanced knowledge, a sense of political history, and a mission to seek out Destiny's Darling, inform him of his birthright, and train him up to take on Darth Vader for the heavyweight championship of the universe.

Thus begins our hero's wandering education under Merlin the Mutant, developing his full powers on a tank town tour of the galaxy as he fights his way out of the boonies on a slow spiral trajectory inward towards the Seat of Empire.

Along the way he is spurned by the Princess, accretes a colorful satellite system of doughty lieutenants and top sergeants, puts together a People's Army, saves the Princess from a fate worse than Gor, winning her love in the process, then reveals to her his Secret Identity as the rightful Emperor of Everything, and converts her to his cause.

The guerilla army battles its way to Rome, and fights its way through towards the Presidential Palace for about sixty pages of heavy-duty derring-do. But the Dark Lord ain't the Master of Evil for nothin', kiddo. He slips a horseshoe in one glove and a neural dis-

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rupter in the other, and he and the hero go fifteen rounds of mano a mano for the fate of the universe.

Well Uncle Ugly he ain't never heard of the Marquis of Queensbury and he's got the ref on the pad, and so our boy takes his lumps for about fourteen rounds, two minutes, and forty seconds. Black Bart is way ahead on all the judges' scorecards and he's about to kayo the White Light Kid anyway, so it looks like creation is in for a million years of red hot claws.

But just as he's down and about to go out for the count, his magic powers surface, the Princess blows him a kiss, Obi Wan Kenobi reminds him that the Force is with him, his mutant intellect allows him to slap together a particle-beam pistol out of toothpicks and paperclips, and a lowly spear-carrier whose life he once saved shoots him up with about 100 mg of sacred speed.

He rises from the canvas at the count of nine, delivers a stirring peroration. "Hey bozo," he tells the Ultimate Villain, "yer shoelace is untied." As Ming the Merciless looks down to check it out, the Hero of the People lands a haymaker which knocks him clean out of the ring, out of the novel, and into the next book in the series.

Good triumphs over evil, justice prevails, the hero marries the Princess and becomes Emperor of Everything, and everyone lives happily ever after, or anyway till it's time to grind out the sequel.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? The SF racks are groaning under the leaden weight of these cloned "epic sagas of the struggle between Good and Evil," these "mighty heroes" in skin-tight space suits and brass-bound jockstraps, these "stirring action-adventure tales." With a decent Find and Replace program in your computer, the above can serve as a marketing outline for the majority of SF published, and probably has.

If there could be such a thing as a foolproof formula for crud, this would be it. This is the time-honored equation for the commercial SF plot skeleton with all the variables cranked up to their theoretical limits. The identification figure isn't just a sympathetic hero, he's the ultimate wank fantasy, the reader as rightful Emperor of the Universe, indeed as the Godhead. The stakes are nothing less than human destiny for all time, and the Princess is always the number one piece of ass in the galaxy. The villain is as close to Satan as you can come without awarding both horns and the tail, twirling his black moustache as he feasts on the torment of the downtrodden masses, performs unspeakably vile sex acts, and squashes cute little mammals in wine glasses so he can drink the blood.

Ah, but there is no such thing as a *foolproof* formula for crud, not even the outline of *The Emperor of Everything*. For while it is certainly true that the diligent application of this formula has allowed armies of hacks to pile up mile-

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high mountains of adolescent power-fantasies for the masturbatory delectation of wimpish nerds, wonder of wonders, it is also true that many of the genre's genuine masterpieces fit comfortably within its formal parameters.

Dune, Neuromancer, The Book of the New Sun, The Stars My Destination, most of Gordon Dickson's Dorsai cycle, *The Lord of the Rings, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Lord of Light, Nova, The Einstein Intersection,* Philip Jose Farmer's *Riverworld* books, *Stranger in a Strange Land, Three Hearts and Three Lions,* and many many more novels of real literary worth are brothers between the covers, at least in plot summary terms, to the Ur action adventure formula.

So too, for that matter, are the Book of Exodus, the New Testament, the Bhagavad Gita, the legends of King Arthur, Robin Hood, Siegfried, Barbarossa, and Musashi Murakami, the careers of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, George Washington, Simon Bolivar, Tokugawa Ieyasu, Lawrence of Arabia, and Fidel Castro, not to mention *Atlas Shrugged, An American Dream, The Count of Monte Cristo, David Copperfield, The Man Who Could Work Miracles,* and Superman.

Clearly then we are looking at something far deeper here than a mere commercial fiction formula, a cross-cultural archetypal tale that would seem to arise out of the collective unconscious of the species wherever stories are told, and indeed which some have argued is even *the* archetypal story, period.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is probably the most exhaustive, subtle, sophisticated, and spiritually aware explication of this thesis. Read this one if you really want the inner meaning with copious cross-cultural specifics.

Campbell's Hero, like the hero of *The Emperor of Everything,* begins the tale as a naif, acquires a mentor and a mission, fights his way to the center or the underworld, wins a climactic battle that gains him the object of the quest, often wins himself a Princess, and rises in triumph as a Lightbringer.

This may not be *the* formal template for all fiction, but it is certainly *one* of them, along with the tragedy, the picaresque odyssey, the love story, the tale of the Trickster, the bedroom farce.

For The Hero With A Thousand Faces, unlike the hero of *The Emperor of Everything,* is an Everyman on a mystical quest.

His guide is his shamanistic spiritual master. His journey is the tale of his spiritual awakening. The battles he fights are with the lower aspects of his own nature, either overtly, or imagistically transmogrified into villains or monsters. The underworld or center to which he at last penetrates is the Void at the center of the Great Wheel, the level of the psyche where ego and consciousness emerge out of the collective stuff of creation.

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And the final battle at the center is the struggle to achieve the mystical fusion of his spirit with the world, the successful climax of which is his attainment of spiritual transcendence, graced by which he returns to the world of men as Lightbringer and heroic inspiration.

Thus the ability of this tale to both attract an avid audience no matter how often it is told and to inspire yet another literary masterpiece no matter how many great writers have retold it in the past.

The Hero With A Thousand Faces is, after all, the story of ourselves, or anyway the story of our lives that we all would write if *we* had our fingers on the Keyboard in the Sky, which is why our professional storytellers keep telling it to us again and again throughout the world and across the millennia, and why we're always willing to live it vicariously one more time.

And if it is truly told, like Vonnegut's foma, it can make us feel brave and strong and happy, and by so doing encourage us to feats of spiritual bravery in our own lives. Take, for example, *The Stars My Destination* by Alfred Bester, recently reissued in hardcover by Franklin Watts after an inexcusable sojourn in the underworld of publishing limbo. This novel is generally recognized as one of the half-dozen best SF novels ever written and the prize blossom of the SF novel's 1950s flowering.

Gully Foyle, space freighter deckape, Everyman at a karmic nadir, opens the novel marooned on a wreck and about to expire. A spaceship approaches within rescue distance, but passes him by, lighting up the depths of his dormant spirit with the fire of vengeance.

Hate drives him to mighty deeds. He survives, escapes, begins his quest to ferret out and destroy "Vorga," the spaceship that left him to die, in the opening acts of which he discovers the corporate powers and machinations behind the deed, and ends up thrown in the literal underworld, the Gouffre Martel, a deep cave in which prisoners suffer total darkness and total isolation. There he meets the Princess-cum-spirit-guide, Jisbella McQueen.

They escape from the underworld, and Foyle transforms himself into Formyle of Ceres, a rich and powerful figure able to pursue and hunt down the powers behind Vorga at the highest political and social levels.

Foyle does not merely amass the fortune and assume the identity of Formyle of Ceres; through a process of worldly and spiritual education, we see him grow into his true manhood, we see his quest for vengeance transform itself into a quest for social justice.

At the climax of the novel, Bester, through a brilliant synergy of prose and something like illustration, puts Foyle and the reader through what can only be called a genuine psychedelic peak experience. Trapped and burning in another underworld, his senses crossed

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and mixed into synethesia, Foyle teleports wildly through space and time while morally wrestling with the question of what to do with the secret substance PyrE.

PyrE is a thermonuclear explosive that can be detonated by thought alone. Anyone can do it. Foyle, through his evolution into The Hero With A Thousand Faces, has gained the power to "space-jaunte," to teleport anywhere in the galaxy. At this moment, he is the Emperor of Everything for fair. He has the power to literally open the universe to man. He has a secret, which, if it gets out, will give whoever knows it the power to destroy civilization. The fire of the gods is in his hands for good and/or evil.

What is a true hero to do? Sit on the secret of PyrE and arrogate the ultimate power unto himself? Leave it in the hands of the "responsible" power structure for safety?

The ultimate moral greatness of *The Stars My Destination* is that Gully Foyle does neither.

In the avatar of the fully awakened Everyman, he turns the fire of the gods over to Everyone, he places PyrE in the hands of the people.

"We're all in this together, let's live together or die together," he tells the worlds of men. "All right, God damn you! I challenge you, me. Die or live and be great. Blow yourself to Christ and gone or come and find me, Gully Foyle, and I make you men. I make you great. I give you the stars."

Everyman, transformed into the Lightbringer, like the true Bodhisattva, eschews the pinnacle of egoistic transcendence, and returns to the worlds of men not as an avatar of the godhead, but as Everyman reborn, as the *democratic* avatar of the godhead within us all. And *that,* not the magnificence of some anointed Darling of Destiny, is the true light of the world.

This is the true telling of the tale for the modern world, a version that in a sense would have literally been inconceivable prior to the advent of the democratic ethos, though there are echoes of it in Buddhism and the myth of Prometheus. Indeed this spiritual message is one that the majority of people still don't seem all that ready to hear, or at least all the avid readers of all those clones of *The Emperor of Everything.*

Just as republics tend to degenerate into empires, paths of enlightenment into hierarchical religions, and inspirational leaders into tyrants, so does the tale of The Hero With A Thousand Faces tend to degenerate into *The Emperor of Everything,* and for much the same reasons.

Gully Foyle is a true hero not because of his derring-do, though he does his share of derring, nor because of the godlike powers he attains, but because he achieves at the end the moral heroism and clarity of the Bodhisattva.

But few mighty heroes, fictional or otherwise, eschew the throne of

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transcendent power. Even noble Caesar, republican at heart, accepted the crown of empire the fourth time around.

Paul Atreides, the overtly transcendent hero of Frank Herbert's Dune saga (which is to say *Dune, Dune Messiah,* and *Children of Dune,* the novels in the series which chronicle his life), prescient superman that he is, wrestles with this final task of the true hero and ultimately fails to his own sorrow.

Paul is the hunted rightful exile heir to the dukedom of Arrakis. He undergoes a whole series of initiation mysteries under many spiritual masters and mistresses as he raises up the Fremen into the People's Army which will free the planet from the evil Harkonnens. Paul is destined by genetic breeding to become the Kwizatz Haderach, a being of such godlike prescient power that he will be worshipped as a god in whose name jihad will sweep the worlds of men. At the triumphant end of *Dune,* he not only destroys the Harkonnens but stands fully revealed as the avatar of the godhead and quite literally crowns himself Emperor of Everything.

Superficially, *Dune* seems like the ultimate power fantasy for nerdish adolescents. One meets the identification figure as the special young boy that is one's own dreamself, follows him through battle, spiritual adventure, and derring-do, and then finally one becomes the transcendent object of worship of all the worlds and crowns oneself Emperor of Everything. The perfect wank, or so it would seem.

But not to Paul Atreides.

The drug melange has made Paul prescient, so that quite early on he envisions the jihad that he is destined to bring. And he abhors it. Everything he does, at least on a certain level of self-deception, is designed to prevent it, but everything he does ends up leading him back along the timeline to the inevitable. At the end of *Dune,* he can only surrender to his unavoidable destiny, assume the godhead, crown himself emperor, and become the icon of the jihad.

Thus, the superficially triumphant denouement of *Dune* is really a tragedy. The Hero achieves everything up to and including the crown of god-king of the universe, but unlike Gully Foyle, he cannot transcend his transcendence, he cannot achieve the grace of the Bodhisattva, he cannot place the scepter of enlightenment and power in the hands of Everyone, he cannot stop his own jihad.

And his personal tragedy is that he knows it. Indeed, he has known it all along. He spends most of *Dune Messiah* as the enthroned messiah in question, a crabbed and cranky figure presiding over the bureaucratic institutionalization of his own cult of personality. He dies in *Dune Messiah,* is reborn in *Children of Dune* as a desert Jeremiah, and dies again without destroying his own mythos.

This is what makes the first three books in the Dune series a

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literary achievement instead of a masturbatory power fantasy even though the elements of the latter are all there to the max. Herbert has irony in these three novels, and so does his archetypal Hero. In a sense, the novels are a mordant commentary on the story of The Hero With A Thousand Faces. Paul may become god-king of the universe, but he cannot escape the destiny that has raised him to this pinnacle, he cannot abdicate to the republic of the spirit, nor can he escape the dire consequences of his own godhood. He is a god who can do everything but attain his own final enlightenment, without which his life is a failure, and this retelling of the tale a tragedy.

This is also why the rest of the Dune books, the ones that take place after Paul is finally gone for good, degenerate into a series of retellings of *The Emperor of Everything,* in which messianic figures and Jesuitical conspiracies battle for spiritually meaningless power in the long long pseudo-medieval aftermath of his passage.

Taken as a whole the Dune series is almost a perfect textbook example of how and why the tale of The Hero With A Thousand Faces so easily devolves into its unfortunate mirror-image, *The Emperor of Everything*. In superficial terms, one is as much a power fantasy as the other, but the true tale also has a moral and spiritual dimension. Shorn of its derring-do, The Hero With A Thousand Faces is a myth of enlightenment like *Siddartha* or *The Magic Mountain* or *The Dharma Bums* in which the payoff for the reader is vicarious mystic transcendence and elevated moral consciousness.

But shorn of its inner spiritual heart, shorn of Gully Foyle's climactic mystical democracy or Paul Atreides' tormented ironic prescience, the tale can only become what Hitler made of Nietzsche.

For alas, the Fuhrerprincip is the dark flip side of the tale of The Hero With A Thousand Faces. For without the moral vision of a Bester or the tragic irony of a Herbert, the inner light of the story is lost, and in place of a paradigm of spiritual maturation, we are left with only the pornography of power, with the egoistic Faustian masturbation fantasy of the fascist mystique, with the reader's hands in his tight black leather pants as he envisions himself as the all-powerful ubermensch in the ultimate catbird seat.

Few of us, after all, are Bodhisattvas, most of us would like to feel a good deal more powerful than we really are, and so all too many of us are attracted to the Fuhrerprincip just as long as we can fantasize ourselves as der Fuhrer in question. That's why, given reasonably skillful retelling, the latest clone of *The Emperor of Everything* will still move off the racks, especially if it is properly packaged with bulging thews, phallic weaponry, and suitable fetish items. Remove the inner light from the eyes of The Hero With a Thousand Faces and

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the face that leers back at you has a cowlick and a Charlie Chaplin moustache.

That's also why Adolf Hitler has become as powerful an archetype as the Hero, why Nazi imagery still has such a baleful appeal forty years later, and in a certain sense how Hitler mesmerized Germany. And also why the despiritualized version of the tale is so dangerous to the mental health of the reader and the body politic.

In my own novel, *The Iron Dream,* I attempted an exorcism of this demon in terms as overt as I could manage. Here is *The Emperor of Everything* to the putrid max. Feric Jaggar, our Hero, destined for rule in his genes, fights his gory way from ignominious exile in the lands of the mutants and mongrels to absolute rule in the Fatherland of Truemen, after which he wages a successful Holy War to purge the Earth of degenerate mutants and sends off clones of himself to conquer the stars.

But *The Iron Dream* is a novel within a novel, and the internal novel is a thing called *Lord of the Swastika* by one Adolf Hitler. Feric Jaggar is Hitler's dream of himself as the tall blond Aryan superman, and *Lord of the Swastika* is Hitler's fantasy of the triumph of the Third Reich in an alternate world after nuclear war has polluted the gene pool, written in yet another alternate world in which Nazi Germany never happened and Hitler himself was a lowly SF hack.

Lord of the Swastika begins with a science fantasy feel and small-scale mutant bashing, but Hitler's brain is rotting away from paresis as he writes it, he begins to gibber, the violence becomes surreally horrid and grand scale, military technology advances by leaps and bounds, and by the time the novel is two-thirds over, the reader who has been getting off on this stuff finds himself confronted with the awful revelation that he has been getting off on the racism, sturm und drang, military fetishism, and inner psychic imagery of the Third Reich itself, replete with swastikas, Nuremberg rallies, SS Panzer divisions sweeping across Europe, carpet-bombing of population centers, genocide, concentration camps, and gas ovens . . .

Hitler ends his novel by cloning seven-foot-tall blonde SS supermen in toilet bowls and sending them off in great spurting phallic rockets to exterminate mutants and monsters and aliens throughout the galaxy, each division of Werewolf SS heroes led by a clone of der Fuhrer himself.

The idea, of course, was to suck the reader into the standard *Emperor of Everything* power fantasy and then point out none too gently what this dynamic had actually led to in *our* alternate world by bringing the Nazi symbology right up front and laying on the violent loathsomeness with a trowel. The Emperor of Everything *really is* der Fuhrer, suckers, and you have been marching right along behind him.

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To make damn sure that even the historically naïve and entirely unself-aware reader got the point, I appended a phony critical analysis of *Lord of the Swastika* in which the psychopathology of Hitler's saga was spelled out by a tendentious pedant in words of one syllable.

Almost everyone got the point. . . .

And yet one review appeared in a fanzine that really gave me pause. "This is a rousing adventure story and I really enjoyed it," the gist of it went. "Why did Spinrad have to spoil the fun with all this muck about Hitler?"

And the American Nazi Party put the book on their recommended reading list. They really liked the upbeat ending.

The point of which being that the appeal of *The Emperor of Everything* to the longings for power within all of us save the true Bodhisattva is so powerful that some readers can even get off on it when it means reveling in genocide and identifying with Adolf Hitler.

This is admittedly as extreme as an example of the phenomenon can possibly get and the overwhelming majority of the readers of *The Iron Dream* did get the point.

More commonly though, the writer himself may not be entirely aware of what he is doing, for it is all too easy to lose the inner meaning of The Hero With A Thousand Faces. At which point entropy and commercial pressure almost always pull the tale down into *The Emperor of Everything,* as witness what happened to even such as Frank Herbert in the latter Dune novels, or Robert Silverberg's descent from the brilliant version of *Son of Man* to the skilled but passionless rendition in *Lord Valentine's Castle,* or Orson Scott Card's trajectory from *Songmaster* and *Hart's Hope* through *Ender's Game* and into *Speaker for the Dead.*

In *Hart's Hope* and *Songmaster* Card amply demonstrated that he understood the inner meaning of the archetypal hero tale and could bring it home to the reader with power and clarity.

Hart's Hope is a fantasy novel set in a densely-symbolic pseudo-medieval landscape largely of Card's own imaginative making. It is an overtly mystical retelling of the Hero tale in which self-sacrifice is elevated over egoistic triumph, and it works admirably.

Songmaster plays *The Emperor of Everything* off against the artistic impulse, music in this case, and Card comes down squarely on the side of esthetics, on the side of the human spirit against worldly power.

So how did a writer like this end up producing *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead?* And why have these latter-day works gained him the sales and awards and readership denied him for artistically and morally superior work like *Hart's Hope* and *Songmaster?*

The chronology of how the first two novels in what appears to be

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the continuing saga of Andrew "Ender" Wiggin came to be written may prove instructive. Card first published the novella version of *Ender's Game*. Then he apparently wrote the outline for *Speaker for the Dead* as a sequel to same but decided to turn *Ender's Game* into a novel first, perhaps because he realized in medias res that he had started himself a trilogy without knowing he had done so initially.

Structurally, it really shows. The final chapter of *Ender's Game* seems entirely dissociated from the rest of the novel and seems to exist entirely as a bridge to *Speaker for the Dead,* which in turn takes certain clumsy pains to establish the back story of *Ender's Game* which Card could have almost completely ignored if he had conceived of either book as a free-standing novel.

The weird effect is of a phantom missing novel in the series between *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead,* a novel which *Speaker for the Dead* alludes to as if the reader could have read it, and for which the last chapter of *Ender's Game* reads like the marketing outline.

In fact the missing novel, to judge by the outline, would have been much more interesting than the books Card actually wrote, and indeed might be most of the real story.

Ender's Game takes the Hero from boyhood through combat game training to his destined apotheosis as commander via game machine of the human fleet that exterminates the misunderstood alien Buggers, an act of genocide he is tricked into committing, but for which he nevertheless feels a guilt he must expiate.

Speaker for the Dead, via time-dilation effect, gives us a period centuries later, in which Ender, now approaching middle age, has become a wandering "Speaker For the Dead," speaking the truth of dead lives upon invitation as he sees it, a saintly figure, or so we are told, while the legend of Ender the Genocide lays darkly on the worlds as a warning against xenophobia.

Meanwhile another alien race, the so-called Piggies, have been discovered on the planet Lusitania. The Piggies are technologically primitive and believe that certain trees are the wise and transcendent reincarnations of their dead ancestors. Having been taught a lesson by Ender's extermination of the Buggers, the human colonists fence themselves off on a reservation and leave the Piggies to their own devices, with only the anthropological team of Pipo, Libo, and Novinha studying them under a restrictive covenant of non-interference. Pipo is Libo's father. Novinha and Libo love each other and plan to be married.

They are appalled when their favorite Piggy, a respected figure in Piggy society who has seemingly just achieved an increase in status, is found flayed open by his compatriots with a sapling planted in his chest. Worse still, when Pipo, the senior anthropologist, is given

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the same treatment after appearing to have merely done the Piggies a good turn.

Ender is summoned to speak for the death of Pipo, a trip that will take objective decades but will not significantly age him thanks to the time-dilation effect.

During this long storyline hiatus, Card is constrained to force poor Novinha to act like a complete idiot. She knows that the reason why the Piggies killed Pipo is buried in a data bank to which Libo would gain access by law if they married. Trained anthropologist that she is, does she delve into the data bank to learn the truth?

Uh-uh, because if she did, there would be no novel. She would easily learn the secret that Card has the puissant Ender winkle out hundreds of pages later as the climactic denouement, and which anyone who has read much science fiction has probably guessed already. (Hint: could it be possible that the primitive Piggies actually *do* understand their own life-cycle? Might a bear *really* know how to shit in the woods?)

So in order for the story to proceed, Card has Novinha refuse to marry Libo in order to save him from gaining knowledge that might somehow make him suffer Pipo's fate. Instead she marries someone she doesn't love, and conducts a decades-long secret affair with Libo whose children she bears, making the lives of all concerned miserable.

And all to no avail. By the time Ender arrives, the Piggies have done it to Libo anyway.

The rest of the novel, which is to say the bulk of it, consists of Ender uncovering the truth about Novinha's secret affair with Libo and the truth about the life-cycle of the Piggies, his unconvincing falling in love with the unpleasant Novinha, and what would appear to be a set-up for yet another Ender novel, in which Ender, having resurrected the Buggers and made peace between the humans and Piggies, will be constrained to defend Lusitania from a new set of baddies.

There just might have been enough real material here for a solid novelette, a xenobiological puzzle piece of the sort Philip José Farmer did so well in the collection *Strange Relations*. But then Novinha's long secret affair with Libo would have no motivation, and Ender Wiggin would be entirely superfluous to the tale.

But what about the "phantom novel," the outline for which formed the final chapter of *Ender's Game*? Paradoxically enough, the last chapter of *Ender's Game* contains more novelistic material than *Speaker for the Dead;* indeed, in terms of The Hero With A Thousand Faces, the unwritten novel is the true ending of the tale of Ender Wiggin.

In a mere twenty-two pages, Ender journeys to the planet of the Buggers, makes psychic contact with the last remaining Bugger queen, learns the full truth of the

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mutual misunderstandings that led to the genocidal human-Bugger war, creates the mythos-cum-religion of Speaking for the Dead, rescues the Bugger queen, stuffs her in a jar, and sets off on his long journey among the planets as the first Speaker for the Dead looking for a suitable planet on which to resurrect the Buggers he has all but exterminated.

In general terms, the adolescent Hero descends to the underworld of his own guilt, achieves true knowledge via psychic communion with the alien spirit guide he finds there, and emerges as the fully mature Lightbringer to resurrect the higher consciousness he has unwittingly destroyed, and speak the wisdom he has gained in the process to the peoples of the worlds.

No wonder Card had to resort to an idiot plot to write Wiggin into *Speaker for the Dead*! His true story was over before the book began.

But why didn't Card write the middle novel, which, if executed as well as *Ender's Game,* let alone *Hart's Hope* or *Songmaster,* would surely have been the best of the three? And why did he feel constrained to inject Ender Wiggin into the thematic material of *Speaker for the Dead* when the whole thing would have worked better if he had stuck to the story of Libo and Novinha?

From this vantage one can only guess. Perhaps Card felt he had already told the true tale of his Hero's spiritual coming of age twice to his own satisfaction in *Hart's Hope* and *Songmaster.* Perhaps the relative indifference with which these fine heartfelt novels were greeted persuaded him to take the same successful career strategy Robert Silverberg did with *Lord Valentine's Castle* and stick to the basics of the commercial series format. Or just maybe his own craft was sufficient to run the reader-identification number on *himself* to the point where Ender Wiggin became the *writer's* alter ego as well as the reader's, a character he couldn't let go of and couldn't delve too deeply because he had evolved into a mouthpiece for Card's own political and philosophical passions.

It wouldn't be the first time a writer lost the psychic separation between himself and his hero. Mickey Spillane ended up playing Mike Hammer in a movie. Hal Mayne degenerated into a mouthpiece for Gordon Dickson's sociopolitical theorizing in *The Final Encyclopedia.* Marion Zimmer Bradley has been known to administer the Amazon's Oath at Darkover conventions. Barry Maltzberg details this process definitively in the hilarious but harrowing *Herovits' World.*

Now, to my knowledge, Orson Scott Card has never been seen carrying a mysterious cocoon or Speaking for the Dead at conventions, but the dangers of *writing The Emperor of Everything* can be a lot subtler than that.

As I pointed out before, most of us would like to feel a good deal

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more powerful than we really are, no one more so than a writer whose worthy work has thus far not gained him his just portion of fame and fortune, so why shouldn't *he* be attracted to the Fuhrerprincip when *he* can easily enough write his own wish fulfillment figure into the story as der Fuhrer in question?

Card's first Ender, the one in the original novelette, lives out the nerdish adolescent power fantasy of *The Emperor of Everything,* conquering the baddies, but only to have the triumphant payoff turn into a moral tragedy. Shorn of the hot air and incest sub-plot blown into the novel version, this is the Card of *Hart's Hope,* a nice little story with real mordant bite.

Card's second Ender, the Ender of *Speaker for the Dead,* has already degenerated into a stock figure, a "hero" like Conan or Perry Rhodan or Doc Savage, "heroic" only in the sense that he is the identification figure who wins the battles and gets the girl.

Actually, like most incarnations of *The Emperor of Everything,* he is something of a self-righteous prig and moral monster, a pur sang power fantasy without inner light, differing only in degree from Feric Jaggar. He is the only man alive who has access to all the data banks in the galaxy through "Jane," an Artifical Personality who has evolved therein beknownst only to Ender. Jane also gives him the magic power to manipulate electronic machinery. The ultimate hacker's power fantasy.

He is almost always right, and his, and by extension the author's, words of wisdom time and again have the power to enlighten hearts and cure deep-seated neuroses because Card tells us so.

He is a hero because he is smart, possessed of secret knowledge and powers, gets the girl, and is one hell of a stump speaker. But what of the inner light of the true hero?

Card has worked up a wonky ecology for Lusitania in which only four, count 'em, four species survive on the entire planet. This is due to a virus of which everyone on the planet is now a carrier. Scientific absurdity aside, the point is that anyone from Lusitania traveling off-world can devastate entire planetary ecosystems.

The higher authorities learn this, declare a quarantine and dispatch a fleet to enforce it. Our compassionate hero, however, successfully machinates to send his crippled stepson by Novinha, infectious though he is, off planet for personal reasons. As the novel ends, the humans, Piggies, and Buggers are about to unite under Ender to fight the wicked quarantine fleet, which, understandably enough, is ready to destroy Lusitania if necessary to preserve the ecospheres of the human worlds.

Lebensraum for the Piggies and the Buggers and the Lusitanian humans under the leadership of the great hero at the risk of exterminating all life on many other planets.

And that is what the true heroic

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myth is always on the edge of degenerating into under the pressure of commercial realities which mitigate against dissipating the targeted audience's reveries with irony or moral ambiguities or terminating the identification figure's tale with a spiritually sophisticated closure. In the process of pushing all the reader's power fantasy buttons, the writer of *The Emperor of Everything* all too often ends up pushing his own.

Worse still, in Skinnerian terms, this often receives positive reinforcement in the form of sales and awards, making it that much more difficult for a writer of worth to separate his hero's success from his own, to regain the clarity of the inner light necessary to attempt something like *Hart's Hope* or *Songmaster* or the "phantom" Ender Wiggin novel.

But at least Orson Scott Card *did* apparently know this well enough to outline the "missing" Ender Wiggin novel as the final chapter of *Ender's Game,* perhaps as some kind of spirit message to himself from the author of *Songmaster* and *Hart's Hope.*

And now we have *Seventh Son,* the first novel of who knows how many in the "Tales of Alvin Maker," a fantasy set in an alternate America of the early nineteenth century in which the United States never came into being and magic of a kind works. Alvin is another of Card's young nascent heroes, and *Seventh Son* takes him no farther than the encounter with his first spirit guide and the beginning of his life's journey, so it is far too soon to say whether he will evolve into another Emperor of Everything or a true Lightbringer.

So far the signs are fairly promising. The background is far richer and more well-realized than anything in *Ender's Game* or *Speaker for the Dead* and the character relationships more ambiguous and complex, and that is a good sign that Card may be returning to the form of *Songmaster* and *Hart's Hope.*

On the other hand, it seems certain that Alvin Maker is destined for Great Things. Whether they will be the Great Things of The Hero With A Thousand Faces or the Great Things of the Emperor of Everything remains to be seen. Orson Scott Card has proven that he contains both potentials within him. Maybe the issue is still in doubt there too, since the full tale of Alvin Maker has yet to be written.

If the danger in writing *The Emperor of Everything* is that the writer may lose sight of his own inner light in the process, the prize for the writer who successfully carries through with The Hero With A Thousand Faces is the recapture of same.

Orson Scott Card would seem to be embarking on another version of that perilous but potentially deeply rewarding literary vision quest. It will be interesting to see which avatar emerges out the other side. ●

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S
SCIENCE FICTION
Magazine's

Second Annual READERS' AWARD

Well, the days have hurried swiftly by, and here it is, time for our Second Annual Readers' Award poll. We instigated this award last year, and received an enthusiastic response from our readers—and we hope that everyone who responded last year will vote *this* time, too!

This is our chance to hear from *you;* that's the whole idea behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* last year? This is your chance to let us know!

Over the years, our readers have never been shy about letting us know, informally, just which stories in the magazine they found to be the most exciting and thought-provoking. Now's your chance to let us know formally, by ballot, which stories *you* thought were the best published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1987. This is *your* chance to tell *us* what novella, novelette, and short story you liked best last year, out of all the fiction we published. And this year—after receiving dozens of ballots that chided us for *not* having awards in these categories *last* year—we are adding three new categories as well: Best Cover Artist, Best Interior Artist, and Best Poem. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories and poems published in last year's issues of *IAsfm* (pp. 187–189), to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, you may list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than needing to list individual covers or interior illustrations.) Only material from 1987-dated issues of *IAsfm* is eligible. And only stuff that was actually published *in IAsfm* is eligible (you may think that this is so elementary that it goes without saying, but you should have seen some of the ballots we got *last* year!), so don't bother sending us nominations for stories published in *Analog* or, God help us, *other* companies' magazines. All ballots must be postmarked no later than Feb. 1, 1988, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue. Vote today!

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With the holiday lull, here's a chance to look at con(vention)s through March. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (business) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many numbers are homes). Be polite on the phone. When writing, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

DECEMBER, 1987

6-8—**CzarKon.** For info, write: **1156 Remley Ct., University City MO 63130.** Or call: **(314) 725-6448** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Eureka MO (if city omitted, same as in address) at Day's Inn. Guests will include: John (Spaceways) Cleve, J. R. Daniels. Adults-only relaxacon.

4-6—**TropiCon., 4427 Royal Palm Ave., Miami Beach FL 33307.** Holiday Inn Oceanside, Ft. Lauderdale FL. G. R. R. Martin. An excuse to go south.

JANUARY, 1988

1-3—**EveCon, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001. (301) 422-1235.** Crystal City VA (by Washington DC). Fun.

8-10—**HexaCon, 556 Kingwood-Locktown Rd., Flemington NJ 08822.** Lancaster PA. Ben Bova, M. Kaye.

15-17—**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146. (206) 938-4844.** Everett WA. Philip Jose Farmer, artist Steve Gallacci, fan Betty Bigelow. Lower-key (800 members) than March's three-ring NorwesCon.

15-17—**ChattaCon, Box 1632, Chattanooga TN 37401. (615) 698-7938.** Freas, Steakley, Chas. Grant.

15-17—**EsoteriCon.** Sheraton Hotel, Elizabeth NJ (Near NY City) Stressing the occult arts.

29-31—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Greg Bear, D. Mattingly, E. Asher. Limited to about half 1987's 4000. Advance sellout possible. Call or write.

FEBRUARY, 1988

12-14—**SerCon, Box 27345, Austin TX 78755.** SERious & CONstructive. Written SF/fantasy (no media).

12-14—**ConTinuity, 5304 Dixieland Rd., Birmingham AL 35210.** Jo Clayton, S. Webb, V. & R. Lindahn.

12-14—**EclectiCon, 3630 Kings Way #33, Sacramento CA 95821.** Beverly Garland Hotel. Second annual.

12-14—**CostumeCon, 112 Orchard Ave., Mt. View CA 94043.** San Jose CA. Annual SF costumers' do.

27-Mar. 1—**ConTact, % Stone, 4733 T St., Sacramento CA 95819. (916) 731-8778.** Worldbuilding workshop, rather than a traditional con. Anthropology and SF. Theme: "Cultures of the Imagination."

MARCH,1988

24-27—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101, 789-0599, 784-1087.** Tacoma WA. The big con of the region. Over 100 pros (authors, editors, artists, etc.) expected.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $60 in 1987.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. 1989 World SF Con.

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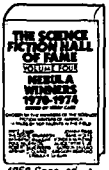

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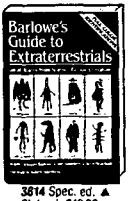

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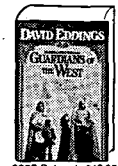

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